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JESUS BEYOND CHRIST:
ERRI DE LUCA AND THE "SELF AS STUMBLING BLOCK"¹

Erri De Luca (Naples, 1950-), the former 1970s far-left activist (close to the political movement Lotta Continua) and talented climber, chose to be a workman in various countries. After the political movement's dissolution and his departure to building sites outside Italy, he decided not to bring any book from his past with him (political or literary texts) and to let "emptiness" invade his present library. This left De Luca without books, except one, the Bible. The author, who still defines himself as a "non-believer," got in touch with the original Hebrew Holy Wit, in order to "deepen the distance with the day."² To acquaint himself with the original language of Revelation, he taught himself ancient Hebrew. The Bible is everywhere, in every text, whatever the literary genre, time or space. De Luca offers a "fragmentary, fragmental, fragmentist even fractal" work that the reader can or must reconstruct in order to reveal the global picture of reading, writing and translating poetics, as in a patchwork whose different pieces alongside each other form a drawing.³

De Luca's work, following the example of the Bible, is made up of plural and heterogeneous books: biblical re-translations, exegetic compendiums, narrations, theatre plays, poems, musical spectacle, press articles, and interviews. And yet, repetition unifies the plural in the singular, the multiple in the one, where one can read the author's multiple "I", simultaneously similar and different.⁴ Because De Luca defines duality as parity instead of

¹ An oral presentation of this article was given at the conference "Currents of the Imagination: Circumnavigating the Literary Globe" organized by The Southern Comparative Literature Association, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, 21-22 October 2010. I am grateful to Professor Mary Boldt who helped me to translate my paper.

² De Luca's interview, CRDP, Nice, 2005, <http://www.crdp-nice.net/videos/itv.php>. All translations from French or Italian are personal.

³ F. Susini- Anastopoulos, *L'écriture fragmentaire. Définitions et enjeux* (Paris: PUF, 1997), 1.

⁴ *Pianoterra*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 1995, p. 84: "Everybody is multiple, even if, as time passes, we prefer to simplify this multiplicity to a singular poverty. The obligation of being individuals, to answer to a name and only to one name, silences the variety of persons crowded inside everybody.

the opposite of one, he allows the subject or the text to form a couple whose strength is greater than the sum of its parts.⁵

The Bible seems to have triggered in De Luca's writing, a real "stumbling block over himself," according to F. Durant-Bogaert.⁶ As the translation only echoes the author's self, the translation's only starting and stopping point is the author's self. Yet, the text one has to translate imposes itself like an *agôn*, a confrontation, because the "I" is always brutally opposed to a "self" that stands in the way. In De Luca's work, this obstacle seems to be the faith that he personally denies (non-believer), but accepts for others (not atheistic). Yet, he resorts to the Bible (Catholic and Hebrew) in an almost systematical and obsessional way. "Je est un autre [Me is another]" claims Rimbaud, and we could say about De Luca that "Me is others," several masks, or better, several faces of the same mask. F. Durant-Bogaert adds that "the self that the translation meets, that it confronts, has nothing to do with the unified, reassuring, and often sovereign subject that Philosophy adores."⁷ Like Janus Bifrons, De Luca is dual, both writer and translator. The author confronts a plurality of voices, disharmonical chords, the "paradoxical religion" of a self-inscribing, self-declaring "me."

"I don't know paradoxical religion, because I am not religious and I don't think I'm paradoxical either," answers De Luca in response to our proposal. He refuses the label of atheist because, etymologically, the a-theos denies others' faith:

I can't say I'm an atheist. The original Greek word is built from the word "theos", God, and the letter a, alpha, whose meaning is privative. The atheist denies God to himself, he denies the enormous possibility of admitting God not only for himself but for others. He excludes himself from the life of many people [...] I am not an atheist. I am someone who does not believe.⁸

After having highlighted that the adjective "believer" is a present participle in Italian, a *continuum*, a permanent interrogation of faith, De Luca uses negation to define himself: he is "someone who does not believe," a "non-believer," in Italian also a present participle. Without eliminating the possible existence of a superior power, the author isn't affected by God's grace, and he doesn't succeed in having faith. Faith is, according to De Luca, expressed in the possibility of praying and saying "thou" –as opposed to "ye" –to God, and in the possibility of forgiving.

To write helps to reveal them again." "Ognuno di noi è una folla anche se col tempo si preferisce semplificarla fino alla povertà di un singolare. L'obbligo di essere individui, di rispondere a un nome e a uno solo, abitua ad azzittire la varietà di persone che si accatastano in ognuno. Scrivere aiuta a riaverle."

⁵ *Il contrario di uno* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2003), 99.

⁶ F. Durant-Bogaert, « Traduire : la butée sur soi », in *Traduire, Fabula*, Presses Universitaires de Lille, n°7, 1986. « Le soi-même que la traduction rencontre, auquel elle s'affronte, n'a rien du sujet unifié, rassurant et souvent souverain dont la philosophie raffole. »

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸ « Non posso dire di essere ateo. La parola di origine greca è formata dalla parola "teo", Dio, e dalla lettera "a", alfa, detta privativa. L'ateo si priva di Dio, della enorme possibilità di ammetterlo non tanto per sé quanto per gli altri. Si esclude dall'esperienza di vita di molti. [...] Non sono ateo. Sono uno che non crede. » (*Ora prima*, Magnano, Qiqajon, 1997, p. 7).

De Luca seeks to disentangle himself from his Italian Catholic heritage by criticizing previous translations of the Bible for deviating from the strict meaning of the Hebrew letter through their emphasis on a religious message. Thus, in the first part of his work, he limits his translations, his comments, his rewritings to the Old Testament, to the Tanakh, and radically rejects the New Testament, written in Greek. As he says in *Esodo/Nomi* (his translation of Exodus) he considers Greek as an arrogant language that falsifies the Aramaic voice of Jesus.⁹ He writes:

The stopover in Athens was harmful to our reading of the Sacred language. It was a hijacking and a disaster [...]. There is no evidence, but I think that Jesus' Aramaic, bundled into Greek, also suffered in the transfer. How could a language born and raised singing the divine plurality, the heavenly harem, be adapted to monotheism?¹⁰

In the translations of Exodus, Jonah, Qohèlet, Ruth, Samson, Noah, Babel, Psalm 2, and some Leviticus verses the translator comes back to the "letter" of the text, offering translations that he defines as "extremely literal" to make the Hebraic language audible and visible. Implicitly, without claiming a direct affiliation (notwithstanding allusions to Rachi, the Talmud, or other exegetes), De Luca appropriates the rabbinical hermeneutical method, the *midrash*. The biblical commentaries, but even more the translation notes (more texts than paratexts) testify to this re-proposed and re-presented inheritance, with its intermingling of homilical, didactical, and normative approaches and its recourse to numerical values (*gematria*). Judaism, as a "system of beliefs, rituals and moral prescripts, based on the Bible, on the Talmud and on rabbinical literature, often combined with mystic or kabbalah theosophy," or, better, "Jewishness" as the group of criteria that forms the Jewish identity, without necessarily implying faith, permeates De Luca's work, above all his characters.¹¹ According to D. Boyarin, "Jewishness disrupts the very categories of identity, because it is not national, not genealogical, not religious, but all of these, in dialectical tension with one another."¹² For example, we can read the Wandering Jew *topos* in the characters (and this literary wandering between the books of the author is mimetic of the spatial wandering), or the legendary dybbuk, which is played by Caia's father in *Tu, mio*.¹³ Yet, we can't apply

⁹ TaNaKh stands for Torah (Teaching), Nevi'im (Prophets) and Ketuvim (Writings).

¹⁰ « Non ha giovato alla nostra lettura della Lingua sacra lo scalo di Atene, tappa decisiva del suo smistamento del mondo. È stato un dirottamento e una sciagura. [...] Non c'è prova, ma credo che anche l'aramaico di Gesù, imballato in confezione greca, abbia risentito del trasloco. Come poteva essere adatta al monoteismo una lingua nata e fiorita cantando la pluralità dei numi, l'harmen dei cieli ? ». *Esodo/Nomi*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2006, (1994), 5-6.

¹¹ E. Lévinas, *Difficile liberté*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1976 (1963), 42.

¹² D. Boyarin, "A radical Jew: Paul dans the politics of identity", University of California Press, 1994.

¹³ *Tu, mio*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2002, (1998). "Dybbuk : (attachment in Hebrew) Maleficent spirit who takes possession of a live person's body and who seizes one's personality. "Naked soul" that hasn't found eternal rest or soul that hasn't finished its transmigration cycle, the dybbuk can intrude itself only in a body made vulnerable by sin. It expresses itself with another voice through its host's mouth and alters its behavior. Exorcism allows to force out the dybbuk which leaves the body by the little toe, but, first, it must be identified by name, and a tikkun must be made to allow

Jewishness to De Luca because he is a non-believer. He was born into a Catholic culture that influences him, he is looking for Jewish traditions and language, but he still remains a non-believer.

Thus, reading the Tanakh in the original language seems to have created a real “stumbling block over himself” in De Luca; he is haunted by this founding text. De Luca’s work seems to be a second “stumbling block.” Starting with *Nocciolo d’oliva* we note a shift from the Old Testament to the New Testament.¹⁴ If, according to N. Bonnet, the author was, at the outset, trying to “stay away from a Church, accomplice to the Jewish genocide, at least by its silence,” we later witness a “reconversion” to his father’s religion.¹⁵ Even if De Luca defines himself as a “non-believer,” he can’t escape the Catholic tradition of Italian society embedded in certain linguistic and cultural expressions. According to S. Natoli, “Every individual is always rooted in belief owing to his affiliation.”¹⁶ And as S. Jollin states about Le Clézio, “A deep knowledge of the Bible is not necessary to identify the references [...]. In fact, most of the references listed are part of the common culture.”¹⁷ Themes and terms of the New Testament aren’t altogether absent from De Luca’s earliest narrative works, because of these Catholic cultural influences:

- Fiction allows De Luca to take the point of view of a believer and to affirm his faith in *Aceto*, *arcobaleno*, through the verb “believe” conjugated in the present indicative, first person singular: “I believe not because I see, but because I have been seen” (68). And, at the same time, he insists on his personal and auctorial non-belief, also using the first person singular of the present indicative, in a diffraction of points of view and voices (among the four characters of the text: the narrator, the murderer, the priest, and the host): “You had

it to find rest; otherwise it will possess another person.”, « Dibbouk : (“attachement” en hébreu) Esprit maléfique qui prend possession du corps d’une personne vivante et s’empare de sa personnalité. “Ame nue” qui n’a pas trouvé le repos éternel ou âme qui n’a pas achevé son cycle de transmigration, le dibbouk ne peut s’introduire que dans un corps rendu vulnérable par le péché. Il s’exprime avec une voix autre par la bouche de son “hôte” dont il modifie le comportement. L’exorcisme permet de chasser un dibbouk qui quitte le corps par le petit orteil, mais il faut d’abord l’identifier par son nom et opérer un tikkoun pour lui permettre de trouver le repos, faute de quoi il s’attache à une autre personne. », A. Unterman, *Dictionnaire du judaïsme. Histoire, mythes et traditions*, trad. C. Chevla, Paris, Thames&Hudson, 1997 (1991), 86-87. This definition sticks to the teenager-character-narrator haunted by Caia/Haièle’s father, identified by the girl as “tate”, “daddy” in Yiddish, who alters the voice and behavior of the young boy, urging him to retaliate against the Nazis by setting fire to the hotel of German tourists on the Ischia island. It is the *tikkun* (atonement for wrongs committed in a previous existence, p. 287) that allows to the father’s soul to find rest. This definition is right but the teenager-container hasn’t sinned, or more precisely, the sin is not specified to the reader.

¹⁴ *Nocciolo d’oliva*, Padova, Edizioni Messaggero Padova (EMP), 2003, (2002).

¹⁵ N. Bonnet, « Erri De Luca. En mal de la foi » : « prendre ses distances par rapport à une Eglise qui s’était rendue complice, ne fût-ce que par son silence, du génocide »

¹⁶ S. Natoli, *Il cristianesimo di un non credente*, (Magnano: Qiqajon, 2002), 11-12. « Ogni individuo è radicato sempre in una qualche credenza in ragione della sua stessa appartenenza. »

¹⁷ *Bible et littérature*, sous la direction de O. Millet, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2003, p. 224. « Une intime connaissance de la Bible n’est pas nécessaire, loin s’en faut, pour être en mesure d’identifier les références [...] En effet, la plupart des références relevées font partie de la culture commune [...] »

brought me a Bible as a gift. I wasn't a believer, I always lacked the initial emotion, but I have often read this book" (72). The author adopts a paradoxical position in his writing: it is sometimes defined as "autobiographical," sometimes denied as such. De Luca's writing is closer to "autofiction" or "stereography."¹⁸

- Fiction allows De Luca to reference the biblical text and common culture by winking at the reader. For example, in *Aceto, arcobaleno*, the narrator tells how transparent he was during his youth.¹⁹ During a settling of scores, a young boy waits for him at the end of school and hits him: "I put my hands to cover the injury and I saw his astonished look by my lack of defense. [...] He didn't hurt me a second time. One boy comforted me by saying I was right to turn the other cheek" in a reference to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:39). In addition, we read in *Montedidio*, p. 28: "What was the angel of his country like? I asked him. Someone who knew how to make vodka with snow, he answered me," in a parodical replaying of the water turned to wine by Jesus during the Marriage at Cana (John 2:1-12), adapted to the North European origin of the cobbler Rafaniello.²⁰

- Fiction allows De Luca to reduce the proper name to a common name. In fact, De Luca is interested in Jesus because he is known by everybody and can be used as a referent, a point of comparison to make people understand or think about other texts and other times. Jesus is a name full of signification, of words, of life. Twice, in *Opera sull'acqua* and *L'ultimo viaggio di Sindbad*, children that die during clandestine trips are named Jesus by the sailors.²¹ The link between Jesus the saved-saviour and the dead child is not clear, as if the proper name filled with semantic content has become a simple common name.

Yet, Jesus can't be reduced to a symbol, a lexeme, or a sound. The use of the character in De Luca's work seems more and more urgent, more and more necessary. If the protagonist is twice called "the intruder," from a Jewish point of view ("the imposter"), it is more a poetical than a religious definition: biological intruder as God's son, historical intruder as bearer of a new ideology, he is also a literary intruder into the texts of an author who is

¹⁸ *Aceto, arcobaleno*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2002, (1992). « Io credo non perché vedo, ma perché sono stato visto. » p. 68, « Mi avevi portato una Bibbia in regalo. Non sono stato credente, me ne mancò sempre l'emozione iniziale, però ho letto spesso questo libro. » (p. 72). According to P. Lejeune, in *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, autobiography is a "retrospective narration in prose made by a real person about his own existence, where he puts the emphasis on his individual life, particularly on the story of his personality." (p. 14). Stereography is "dual writing", "novels and autobiographies that shed light on each other", that leaves an "incomplete, fragmented, open autobiography, riddled with holes" (p. 42-43). Autofiction is a term made-up by S. Doubrovsky that indicates a narration based on the principle of the three identities (author-narrator-character) but which declares itself to be fiction, and mixes imagination and memory.

¹⁹ See 14-5.

²⁰ « Portai le mani a coprire la ferita e incontrai il suo sguardo stupito dalla mia mancanza di difesa. [...] Non mi ferì una seconda volta. Uno mi consolò dicendo che avevo fatto bene a offrire l'altra guancia. ». *Montedidio*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2001: « Com'era l'angelo del paese suo, gli ho chiesto. Uno che sapeva fare la vodka con la neve, mi ha risposto. »

²¹ *Opera sull'acqua e altre poesie*, Torino, Einaudi, 2002, p. 33. *L'ultimo viaggio di Sindbad*, Torino, Einaudi, 2003, p. 42.

principally attached to the Tanakh and to the Hebrew language.²² Yet, he is an intruder who increasingly haunts writing, thus becoming more a norm, a guest, and a resident. We can also note that the word “intruder” is applied by the author to the author, when he speaks about mountains (“In these altitudes I am an intruder and can’t have any certainty” and “Mountain is for me a desertical place where you can see the world as it was without us and as it will be then. [...] I come here because you can go deeper into the feeling of being a foreigner, an intruder from the world,” *Sulla traccia di Nives*) or about Napoli, his native city (“So on a December night of the impatient year 1969, I went to Napoli to put me in the faces circle. I already was an intruder. I looked, being forced, at the place on which I turned my back,” *Il contrario di uno*).²³

We can also find references to Jesus in De Luca’s earliest books published in translation. Here again, in a Catholic manner, De Luca proposes a reading of the Old Testament with the keys of the New Testament: the first characters are “types,” “figures” of Christ.²⁴

If De Luca isn’t able to speak *to* God, he continually speaks *about* God. Using direct reference or elliptical evocation, Christian religion (between Catholic culture and a Protestant position that ascribes authority only to the Book) through the New Testament characters, is everywhere in his work.

Nocciolo d’oliva, the biblical commentaries compendium written in 2002, signals this interpretative and scriptural turn. The book is organized in reverse chronological and poetic order: the first part contains five texts about the New Testament (and the fourth one, “Dal fresco di un sepolcro di cantina,” offers the point of view of Jesus on his own story); in the second part there are twenty-one texts about the Tanakh.

Continuing the diachronic analysis of De Luca’s work, we remark that three books about transverse themes (shepherds and fishermen – *Mestieri all’aria aperta*, alpinism – *Sottosopra*, the five senses – *Almeno 5*) are co-authored and present a dual reading; the first part written by De Luca concerns Old Testament characters; the second one, written by Gennaro Matino, a Catholic priest, concerns New Testament characters. If we consider that De Luca is a “non-believer,” this place given to a Catholic voice on the New Testament confirms the initial definition of non-atheism; De Luca doesn’t deny the other’s faith.

²² « Riassunto dell’intruso », *Nocciolo d’oliva*, op. cit., p. 15. « L’intruso », *Opera sull’acqua e altre poesie*, op. cit. p. 13.

²³ *Sulla traccia di Nives*, Milano, Mondadori, 2005: « A queste quote sono un intruso e non so immaginare alcuna confidenza. », p. 17, « La montagna è per me un luogo deserto dove si vede il mondo com’era senza di noi e come sarà dopo. [...] Ci vengo perché qui si approfondisce il sentimento di essere estraneo, un intruso del mondo. », p. 62. *Il contrario di uno*, op. cit.: « Allora una sera di dicembre dell’anno d’impazienza millenovecentosessantanove andai a Napoli a rimettermi nel cerchio delle facce. Ero già un intruso. Guardavo sforzato il posto da cui mi ero staccato. », p. 113.

²⁴ Cf N. Frye, *Le Grand code. La Bible et la littérature*, trad. C. Malamoud, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1984 (1981). N. Frye, *La parole souveraine. La Bible et la littérature II*, trad. C. Malamoud Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1994 (1990). E. Auerbach, *Mimésis. La représentation de la réalité dans la littérature occidentale*, trad. C. Heim, Paris, Gallimard, 1968 (1946). E. Auerbach, *Figura*, trad. M-A. Bernier, Paris, Belin, 1993.

Finally, two recent texts testify to this change of direction in De Luca's production: *In nome della madre* (2006) is a story dedicated to Maria's point of view on her pregnancy, and *Penultime notizie circa Ieshu/Gesù* (2009) proposes different commentaries centered around a Jesus who is both a Catholic Christ and a Jewish intruder.

Of course, the presence of Jesus in contemporary literature is neither original nor innovative, because this "great misunderstood one," this "eternal contemporary,"²⁵ is a character to whom we return to better think about ourselves.²⁶ But De Luca proposes "another" look at the character, to give him an "altra possibilità," "another possibility"; for example, he transforms him into a tree.²⁷

In the Gospel of Mark (verses 8:22-25), Jesus at Bethsaida cures a blind person by putting both his hands and some saliva on the blind person's eyes. After recovering sight, the man identifies men with walking trees.²⁸ In "Investigation of a woodman," Jesus is in symbiosis, even in osmosis, with trees, to the point of becoming their picture.²⁹ Details about woodworking are given with precision, in a specialized vocabulary, showing that this knowledge of materials and species are not excerpts from a dictionary but instead come from an experience lived by the character, the author, and the reader. Jesus appears desecrated. The difficulty of woodworking is accentuated by the hammer's blows on the fingers, at once the rhythm and the risk of the profession, a link between the teenager Jesus and his death on the cross: "When he had them in the flesh, the nails, when he felt them

²⁵ E. Chastand, *Les principes sociaux de l'Évangile*, Nantes, Imprimerie J. Guihard, 1921, p. 75 and p. 5. In a longer article, we would like to compare De Luca and other authors like E. Renan and J. Saramago.

²⁶ *Alzaia*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2004 (1997), p. 117: "[...] every reader of the Sacred Stories [...] has been named by some passage. [...] Reading the Sacred Books sometimes gives the surprise of finding ourselves in some verses. [...] I am looking, in the books, for the letter, or even better, for the sentence which has been written for me and which I underline, copy, extract and take away. [...] Because every reader claims that in a book roll there is something written about him.", « [...] ogni lettore delle storie sacre [...] si è sentito nominare da qualche passo. [...] Leggere i libri sacri dà a volte la sorpresa di trovare se stessi in certi versi. [...] Cerco nei libri la lettera, anche solo la frase che è stata scritta per me e che perciò sottolineo, ricopio, estraggo e porto via. [...] Perché ogni lettore pretende che in un rotolo di libro ci sia qualcosa scritto su di lui. »

²⁷ De Luca uses this expression to define writing as a possibility to change History and stories ("I, as a story's narrator, can free myself from the events, I can change the end of Troy [...]. I can give it another possibility." (« Io da narratore di storie posso prendermi delle libertà con gli avvenimenti, cambiare la fine di Troia [...]. Posso dargli un'altra possibilità. », *Alzaia*, op. cit., p. 58). But writing gives also the possibility of offering another life to real persons: "This is not really about making the things happen in a different way - I don't change them, I can't change the lived life, I can't correct it - yet I give to these persons of the past another possibility [...]" (« Non è proprio un far avvenire le cose in maniera diversa - non le cambio, non posso cambiare la vita accaduta, correggerla - però do [sic] alle persone di allora un'altra possibilità [...] », *Altre prove di risposta*, Napoli, Dante & Descartes, 2002, p. 31). These two remarks which first seem paradoxical ("to change" "I can't change") in fact underscore the author's wish to make writing and literature another, adjacent space. It also applies to biblical characters and texts..

²⁸ Episode cité dans Aceto, *arcobaleno*, op. cit. p. 87, *Penultime notizie circa Ieshu/Gesù*, Padova, EMP, 2009, p. 20.

²⁹ « Indagine su un falegname », *Penultime notizie circa Ieshu/Gesù*, op. Cit., 2009.

enter, he was for the first time on the side of the wood.”³⁰ Death expresses the reversal of values and sensations. The one who worked on wood with iron becomes the wood itself and is pierced by iron. What he did to the wood, a living thing and God’s creature, he must now endure. The story’s conclusion evolves to a poetical rewriting of Jesus’ death, becoming only one with the cross’ wood. Jesus is not only the Revelation of the blind person from Bethsaida put into, the tree-man, he is man made tree, in its total immobility, he doesn’t walk anymore: “He was no longer a walking tree as revealed to him by the blind person from Bethsaida, he was now rooted to the ground and all his steps finished there, with feet joined together and arms wide open like branches.”³¹ Fiction that presents itself like fiction and doesn’t try to be a *trompe-l’œil*, adds to the tree-man’s sight one of the most important senses for the author, omnipresent in this relation to wood, the sense of smell: “And I want to believe, by the imagination of my sense of smell, that the wooden cross was made of conifer. It wasn’t dry and it oozed sap, stroking his nostrils and reminding him of the forests.”³² At first, a personal hypothesis announced like a fictive one (“I want to believe” ... “the imagination of my”), later the idea is accepted in the reading’s pact. Jesus’ death is filtered by eyesight, the sense of smell, and the imagination of the woodworker author: “That’s why he smiled and his head collapsed onto his ribs with a big sigh, like the foliage of a tree that has been cut down.”³³ Metaphorically, De Luca is the blind author who regains his sight, who looks in a new way, at least in a different way, at the world, at the Bible, and at literature.³⁴ And this new look is expressed in writing by the re-creation (and recreation) of the character of Jesus.

Nevertheless, if Jesus provokes a second “stumbling block over himself,” it’s because he allows us to think about the author’s self. In “The intruder summary” (*Nocciolo d’oliva*), a text in which De Luca sketches Jesus’ portrait without details, we can read the privileged themes of the author (birth and concept of generation, multiple racial origins, omnipresence of water, priority of oral speech); these themes, by their selection, underline the identity of the author in the voice of the narrator-character. Jesus also participates in a poetics of sound. Indeed he didn’t write anything but he transmitted his teaching and his ideas using his

³⁰ *Penultime notizie circa Ieshu/Gesù*, op. cit., p. 24: “Quando li ebbe nella carne, i chiodi, quando li sentì entrare, si trovò per la prima volta dalla parte del legno. »

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24: “On the peak there was now a tree man [...]”, « Sulla cima ora spuntava un uomo albero [...] » « Non era più albero che cammina, come gli aveva rivelato il cieco di Betsaida, ora era piantato al suolo e tutti i suoi passi finivano lì a piedi giunti e braccia spalancate come rami. »

³² *Ibid.*, 24-25: « E voglio credere, per pura immaginazione del mio odorato, che il legno della croce fosse di conifero. Non era stagionato e trasudava resina carezzandogli il naso col ricordo dei boschi. »

³³ *Ibid.*, 25: « Perciò sorrise e crollò il capo di lato sulla spalla con uno scroscio di respiro forte, come chioma di albero abbattuto. »

³⁴ “We can suddenly learn some visual things from a blind person, who, discovering the bright light, comes to relate an impression, an unknown detail about something everybody knows. I think that this is the work of literature, the art of telling a story that is not new, no story is new now, with the virginity of a blind person who discovers this story for the first time, coming back to the light, stunned by emotion”, « Si può imparare qualcosa di visivo da un cieco, dall’ultimo venuto al mondo della luce, che viene a dire un’impressione, un dettaglio sconosciuto sopra una cosa risaputa. Credo che questo sia il mestiere della letteratura, arte di raccontare una storia non nuova, nessuna storia lo è più, con la verginità di un cieco che la scorge per la prima volta, tornando alla luce stordito d’emozione », *Alzaia*, op. cit., p. 92.

voice, a voice that remained both in ears and in memories. For Jesus, as for De Luca (and even for the Bible itself), writing is secondary. It comes to establish speech, at the risk of losing its real truth and message. In the text written in the first singular person of Jesus, De Luca seems to be an “nth” apostle, more inclined than John to report Jesus’ discourse, without filling emptiness and silences, without compensating for or supplanting the original (or, better, the originals), without unsaying his faith or his religious message of justice and love, but re-producing a voice. De Luca makes a fairly reliable paraphrase of the texts, one that is all the stronger because it is pronounced by Jesus himself, by a man with human questions, who interrogates Mankind in his essence and existence. Thus, the voices of two individuals – author and character, author and narrator – blend and interweave.

In De Luca’s writing, Jesus has time, and he stops a little to think. His first thought is political, because he uses the noun “revolution.” This point causes De Luca to “stumble over himself”: the return to his own political – communist – past haunts many of his texts (especially his essays and press articles), implicitly or explicitly through nouns, adjectives, symbols, and theoreticians. De Luca claims that he can speak only about his own past, he can write only about people he knew or experiences he had.³⁵ But his political conception and life also apply to a new or other reading of the biblical text, in a strong paradox because Marxist theories deny any relation of superiority or transcendence.

For example, in the first biblical commentaries compendium, *Una nuvola come tappeto*, De Luca offers a reading of the biblical episode of the manna through a socialist point of view, and even speaks about “divine socialism” (93). He includes not only socialist themes (elimination of surplus, fair distribution, use value against exchange value), and socialist indefinite pronouns (each, all) but also the Marxist communist definition: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Thus, we read:

The book says: “But when they measured it out by the omer, he who had gathered a large amount did not have too much, and he who had gathered a small amount did not have too little. They so gathered that everyone had enough to eat.” To each according to his need: there is no other measure to eradicate indigence. From here, from verse 18, chapter 16 of the book of Exodus, socialism will provide the moral rule of giving everyone the essential.

³⁵ *Altre prove di risposta*, op. cit., p. 9: “ [...] and as I am writing, also I am speaking with, I put myself in a verse, I look at before, at the ancestors. [...] I look at persons who are behind [...] Voices, to one who writes, are like visions to a saint. They come from before and are aimed at nobody”, « [...] e mentre scrivo anche mi rivolgo, mi metto in un verso, mi volto verso e a chi : al prima, agli antenati. [...] Mi volto verso la gente che sta dietro [...] Le voci per uno che scrive sono quanto le visioni per un santo. Vengono da un prima e non sono rivolte a nessuno ». Cf p. 31 : “Being my stories, of course they speak about the past : they aren’t prophetic stories, they are stories coming from behind me [...] To a person born in the middle of the past century [...] past is always wider, abundant, large, it is a field in which renew meetings with persons that you can only meet there, behind now, in the writing”, « Essendo storie mie, per forza riguardano il passato: non sono storie profetiche, sono storie alle spalle, provengono da dietro. [...] Per uno nato a metà del secolo scorso [...] il passato è sempre più vasto, più abbondante, più largo, è un campo in cui si rinnovano gli incontri con persone con cui ci si può dare appuntamento solamente lì, all’indietro, nella scrittura ».

It will claim to add: "from each according to his ability," unsuitable reciprocity which won't benefit its cause.³⁶

Put forth during the 1848 revolution, this adage was popularized by the *Critique of the Gotha Program* by Karl Marx in 1891.³⁷ The link between this sentence and the expression "divine socialism" is a humorous wink at the reader because Marxist communists consider that God doesn't exist and religion is "the opium of the people."³⁸ Through this text, we can see that the author gets closer to the ideas of Christian socialism or communism that offer a social reading of the New Testament and we can find in the Acts of Apostles, if not a systematical social doctrine or a program, then at least the principles of socialism:

2, 43-46 Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need.

4, 32-37 The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. [...] There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need.³⁹

From the time of the New Testament (even since the Israel prophets' discourses carried out and radicalized by Jesus) many notions of socialism appear: justice and equality, sharing of goods, collectivism of soil, fraternity, love, work, anti-clericalism, and anti-capitalism.⁴⁰

³⁶ « Dice il libro : "E misurarono con l'omer : chi ne aveva preso di più non ne aveva di troppo, chi ne aveva raccolto di meno non ne mancava, ognuno secondo la sua bocca raccolse". A ciascuno secondo i suoi bisogni : non c'è altra misura per bandire l'indigenza. Da qui, dal verso 18, capitolo 16 del libro dell'Esodo, il socialismo mutuerà la regola morale del fornire a tutti l'indispensabile. Pretenderà di aggiungere : "da ciascuno secondo le sue possibilità", inapplicabile reciprocità che non gioverà alla sua causa », *Una nuvola come tappeto*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2001, (1991), p. 92. New American Bible's translation used to translate the beginning of De Luca's quote.

³⁷ Used for the first time by Louis Blanc, *Organisation du travail*, 1839, as a revision of Saint-Simon (To each according to his capacities, to each capacity according to his works) and of the Acts of Apostles. To Trotsky, in

La Révolution trahie, 1936, it is the "expression of communism, bipartite but indivisible, that supposes abundance, equality, personal development and tremendous discipline."

³⁸ K. Marx, « Critique de la philosophie du droit de Hegel », in *Philosophie*, K. Marx, M. Rubel, Paris, Gallimard, 1982, p. 99.

³⁹ New American Bible's translation.

⁴⁰ Not an exhaustive list : justice and equality (Matthew 18, 6, Epistle to the Galatians 3, 28, 2nd Epistle to the Galatians 8, 13-15), sharing of goods (Acts of Apostles 2, 43-46 4, 32-37), fraternity (Matthew 7, 12 23, 8 Acts of Apostles 4, 32-35), love (Luke 10, 29-37, John 13, 34, 35, 1st Epistle of John 4, 16), work (Matthew 4, 18-22), anticlericalism (Matthew 23 4, 6-8, John 15, 15, Epistle to the Romans 8, 15-16, Epistle to the Galatians 4, 7 and 5, 1), anticapitalism (Luke 6, 24, 25 12, 17-21 and 17, 48 20, 9-16).

According to the precepts of the 1848 French Revolution, Jesus is the “first socialist,” or even the “first communist” because we can say with F. Jollivet-Castelot that “Jesus was communist in the broad but correct sense which implies a perfect non-exclusive fraternity, but a reciprocal independence.”⁴¹

The recurring notions of equality, collectivism of soil, and, especially, love in De Luca’s texts, link the author and the character. De Luca doesn’t identify with Jesus but finds in his life common points that allow him to think about himself and read the New Testament as a reference for literature and life, as opposed to a falsified and secondary book compared to the Tanakh. If De Luca’s texts can’t be defined as texts that profess a Christian socialism (because De Luca declares himself a non-believer), we must, with J-C. Zancarini, “overcome what can appear to be a contradiction” and inscribe “his writing in a tension. We could, *mutatis mutandis*, apply to him what Machiavelli says about Lorenzo de’ Medici: “we can see two different persons in him that are nearly unified with impossible union.”⁴²

We have the impression that the author shifts not only to the New Testament but also to faith, even if he claims that he is not looking for it and that he cannot attain it. From Jesus’ point of view, we can see that, without denying politics, Jesus claims that politics itself is not enough: temporal action should not be separated from the spiritual. This need of pairing politics and religion leads to a comparison: David’s psalms outperform David’s weapons, and religious prayer overcomes political action.

Jesus ends his story with a reflection on his life as an attempt to spread love. While the initial “thou” was addressed to God, the last one is aimed at the reader, announcing the resurrection of everyone and inviting all to Christian faith: “I am waiting for you at the threshold of resurrections, after mine, yours. We will meet here: you will come.”⁴³ De Luca’s “tension” appears in this conclusion. A paradoxical conclusion if we consider that De Luca is non-believer. A merely literary conclusion if we consider that this is a fiction in which the author embraces as closely as possible the truth of his character, without confusing their voices. Yet, this hypothesis would need to separate the voices (author – narrator – De Luca – Jesus) which seems difficult in De Luca’s work.

But De Luca creates neither a Christian character, nor a Jewish one. He creates a literary Jesus, “in between.” Even if we can read a *crescendo* toward religious concepts and words, even if we can read his passion for alpinism as a metaphorical *askesis*, we don’t have to – and we can’t – discuss his “real” faith, because it is a subjective and private notion. What is important is his position, the assumed and asserted position of the writer claiming non-belief even as he is obsessed by the Bible.

⁴¹ F. Jollivet-Castelot, *Jésus et le communisme*, Sin-le-Noble, Editions de la « Rose+Croix », 1926, p. 20-21. « Jésus était communiste au sens large, mais exact du mot, le communisme impliquant une parfaite fraternité non exclusive, pourtant d’une réciproque indépendance [...] ».

⁴² J-C. Zancarini, « *La prima pietra tirata*. Religion et politique chez Erri De Luca » : « dépasser ce qui peut apparaître comme une contradiction » et inscrire « son écriture dans une tension. On pourrait, *mutatis mutandis*, reprendre à son propos le jugement de Machiavel sur Laurent de Médicis : “si vedeva in lui essere due persone diverse, quasi con impossibile congiunzione congiunte” »

⁴³ « Vi aspetto al varco delle risurrezioni, dopo la mia le vostre. C’incontreremo qui, voi ci verrete. », *Nocciolo d’oliva*, op. cit., p. 31.

"To reduce Jesus to a Love Master, or to the crucified, to neglect teaching in favor of kerygma, or to abandon kerygma to make Jesus a simple moral preacher, means radically undermining the Good News," explains F-P. Bowman.⁴⁴ Modern literature allows literary experimentations and the re-proposition of the Bible under a light, if not new, at least different, because "the Bible is all the more solicited by modern literature and critics as the holy book of a faith often lost or only supposed as an anthropological and imaginary code which allows literary creation."⁴⁵ In De Luca's work, Jesus is the very expression of the paradox of an author who does not want to be, and cannot be, a believer, but who, over the course of time, re-discovers a personality close to his values, to his poetics, to his way of being in the world. "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples (Matthew 16:15). Opened to multiple, plural and personal readings, Jesus is, in De Luca's texts, beyond Christ, and allows the author to come closer to the "I" who is a "stumbling block over himself."

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⁴⁴ F-P. Bowman, *Le Christ des barricades. 1789 – 1848-*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1987, p. 349. « Réduire Jésus à un Maître d'amour, ou au Crucifié, négliger l'enseignement en faveur du seul kérygme, ou abandonner le kérygme pour ne faire de Jésus qu'un prédicateur moral, c'est saper radicalement la validité de la Bonne Nouvelle. »

⁴⁵ *Bible et littérature*, op. cit., p. 7. « La Bible est d'autant plus sollicitée par la littérature et la critique moderne qu'elle est le livre saint d'une foi souvent perdue ou seulement supposée comme code anthropologique et imaginaire permettant l'envol de la création littéraire. »