

ROSSO FLOYD¹: A 'SONOROUS' NOVEL BY MICHELE MARI

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Sommario

Il romanzo Rosso Floyd (2010), di Michele Mari, descrive le origini della band britannica, i Pink Floyd. In questo lavoro apparentemente diaristico, Mari crea anche una dimensione sofisticata, inaspettata e 'sonora' che unisce i costrutti binari della forma musicale con quella letteraria. Ogni 'capitolo' del romanzo presenta una 'voce' isolata che rappresenta la prospettiva personale di individui connessi alla storia della band. La risultante molteplicità di voci derivante da questa forma, crea una stringa strutturata di 'suono' che trasforma il libro in una 'partitura' polifonica. In questo articolo verranno identificati gli strati 'sonori' dell'opera tra le pieghe della sua fusione formale postmodernista.

Keywords: genre, musical score, dialogism, novel, Michele Mari.

Michele Mari's work, often on the periphery of the Gothic, is largely associated with experimentation in both genre and historical referencing. His 2010 novel-cum-documentary, *Rosso Floyd*, purports to deal with the history of the British pop band Pink Floyd but is neither a documentary nor a novel in the 'traditional' meaning of the form. The book's defiance of traditional form is clear from the very start, the only identifiable adhesion to the label of 'novel' being the author's use of the novelistic imperatives of fantasy and imagination and a manipulation of "the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive" (Woolf, 2008:42).

¹ In order to avoid confusion, the novel's Italian name, *Rosso Floyd*, will be used to designate Mari's book, while the band's English name, Pink Floyd will be used to designate the group.

The novel's 'chapters' are diaristic pieces couched in the 'voice' of historically identifiable individuals connected to the band; the novel has no page numbers² and no structured narrative development apart from a flow of personal recollections of past events variously relating to Pink Floyd. In a purposeful misdirection, the title page of the book describes the work as a '*romanzo*'/novel³ but immediately follows this designation with a list of other genres that make up the work, thereby creating shifting boundaries while appearing to provide orientation for the reader. The disparate formal pieces listed as making up the novel's parts – 'laments', 'testimonies' and other clearly defined literary forms – are interspersed in random order throughout the 'novel' and used as vehicles for the personal contributions by individuals who impart varying perspectives at differing degrees of intimacy to the band's original founder, Syd Barrett. However, these entries do not only represent disparate genres used for the pleasure of subversion, but serve as an important structural framework that goes beyond their predictable content. While these pieces give relevant information about many aspects of the group's history, they also function within the dictates of their named structural forms, thus creating a complex, but hidden substratum upon which the book is built: "A novel made up of 30 confessions, 53 testimonies, 27 lamentations of which 11 otherworldly, 6 interrogations, 3 exhortations, 15 referrals, one revelation and one contemplation" (Mari 2012)⁴.

This programmatic opening clearly serves as a map for the book's structure. Each of these pieces belongs to a clearly defined genre which elicits the readers' expectations while teasing them into engaging more intimately with the book's ground map. Each, therefore, has a stronger function in the overall scheme than the simple listing seems to imply. This game is then followed by the

² All quotations from the book will therefore be referenced to the section or 'entry' rather than to the page number.

³ The original Italian is footnoted after its English translation. All translations, unless otherwise stated, are the author's own.

⁴ "Romanzo in 30 confessioni, 53 testimonianze, 27 lamentazioni di cui 11 oltremondane, 6 interrogazioni, 3 esortazioni, 15 referti, una rivelazione e una contemplazione".

preface on the following page, which subverts the field further by stating a disclaimer (“Avvertenza”), cautioning the reader from identifying the work as a history:

The confabulation of the voices, which belong from time to time to individuals who actually lived or who are still alive, to made-up characters or fantastic beings, is subservient to a rhetorical and linguistic structure, and has no pretension whatever to having documentary status.⁵

The ‘warning’ issued to the reader around the dangers posed by the “confabulation” of memory is therefore a signposting for the work, mitigating against the veracity of the speeches ‘reported’ in the ‘novel’ by the ‘witnesses’. Right from the beginning, therefore, while the reader is enticed to read *Rosso Floyd* as a biographical history of Pink Floyd – a real band – as an untrustworthy memoir made up of shifting perceptions and unreliable ‘confabulations’, the reader is also led to witness the destabilisation of any possible attempt at biographical certainty. The reader must therefore take cognisance of two levels of reading: the superficial or ‘immediate’ level which appears to capture the band’s biographical history and a second, more esoteric level, based on the genre type of each entry, which creates a complex layer of sonority as the work unfolds, presenting other patterns of relevance on the outer perimeters of the content. While in psychiatry ‘confabulation’ has no intentionality of deceit, in this literary version the disruption of memory is a purposeful game of shifting perceptions, aimed at disorientating the reader.

The first, or superficial level of reading, deals with the more obviously identifiable celebrity gossip similar to the many tribute books written on the band’s fame and fortune and based on verifiable historical facts around the group’s rise and fame. It looks at Syd Barrett and his much-acclaimed personal charm, Roger Waters’ insecurities and tantrums, David Gilmour’s arrival as backup for the

⁵ “La confabulazione delle voci, appartenenti di volta in volta a individui realmente vissuti o viventi, a personaggi inventati, a esseri fantastici, obbedisce a una retorica strutturale e linguistica, e non vuole in alcun modo avere un valore documentario”.

star, Syd, whose progressive mental deterioration caused many guilt-ridden about-turns for his band mates preceding his elbowing-out in 1968. This 'gossip' also covers Syd's influence on the band's early musical profile as well as relations between the band members and the general British music scene of the 1960s. There is elegiac reference to childhood friendships, later professional acquaintances and reference to famous individuals connected to the music industry of the time. Amongst these the reader encounters the 'opinions' and 'revelations' of members of the British and American pop scene of the '60s, '70s and '80s. The reader 'hears' from music producers, film directors and impresarios each of whose fame is secondary to the band's celebrity status in an ever widening series of gossipy associations. There are behind-the-scene battles and tribulations: personal squabbles between Gilmour and Waters and the many psychologically fraught, internecine battles that eventually lead to the band's acrimonious relations, all presented in highly personalised perspectives.

Moreover, even greater than content, the real importance of these diaristic entries is their form. Each entry captures the memories and personal opinions of a clearly defined historical personality, presented to the reader by each of these individual's 'verbal' presence in the form of short, isolated 'monologues'. Each speaker's presence on the page is an individual verbal signature halfway between an oral rendition and a virtual sound recording. The book thus becomes a complex alternation of voices; some reach the reader from the afterlife, others from remembered episodes – opinions and judgements, echoes of recorded documents, snippets of hearsay and gossip, 'factual' reports, emotional memorial pieces – all presented 'verbally' on the written page under the umbrella of a 'remembered' past.

However, another more important ludic quality is intermingled with this pretended 'historicity'. Even though these pieces are fragmentary in nature, they ironically underscore the true nature of the novel, the inherent propensity of which, according to Bakhtin, is a drive towards "contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present" (1981:27). Therefore, the 'spoken' and highly personal perspectives of these pieces adds an importantly 'literary' level of reading to the work, a structure that, by being a clearly fantastic and

unreal perspective, underscores the literary rather than the historical essence of the work. This flow of voices, therefore, creates a level of reference – a sonorous and hidden structure – that is, in my opinion, the real scope of the work and of much greater interest for the engaged reader. On this more fundamentally relevant level, *Rosso Floyd* points to the issue of what the term ‘novel’ actually means. The fact that the author calls this a ‘novel’ must make the reader decode this apparently non-novelistic structure as an indicator of a subversive or ‘hidden’ form. If the reader accepts the criterion for the novel as a “multi-linguaged consciousness” (1981:11), which Bakhtin posits in *The Dialogic Imagination*, then it must be accepted that Mari achieves an alternative and perhaps more fundamental definition of the form by using unrelated dialogues to create an alternative ‘novel’.

Mari makes this quality overt by creating multiple voices as the structuring basis for *Rosso Floyd*: a subtle game of shuffling genres and vocal choruses adding up to become a literary construct arbitrarily identified as a ‘novel’. But while creating a substratum of voices for the projection of the novel’s essence, the sonority, as embodied in the genres of these individual pieces, also turns the book into a virtual score which plays on the sound effects of the structures themselves. Here the literary game extends way beyond the content; the successive concatenation of sound-related genres follow one another in the text, creating a string of ‘sound’ in a way that could be read as a semblance of musical scoring, or what Davies calls “organized sound” (2012:2). This is therefore an inclusion of synesthetic virtual sound in the verbal form. However, the reader must decide if the ‘sound’ itself can be virtual but still present through its being conjured up by the ‘sonorous’ genre that contain it. In terms of strict definition of ‘music’, the understanding of the term that I am proposing clearly falls short, but as a literary game the idea is engaging and worth an attempt at evaluation⁶.

As an opening gambit, the listing of the genres relating to the pieces that make up the ‘novel’ invites the readers into the work, enticing them along a predetermined path of forms inherently

⁶ There are many definitions of what music is, or should be, but it is out of the scope of this article to engage too closely with a definition of musical form in its own right.

associated with aural sound. Some, like the 'confession', the 'interrogation' and the 'testimony'⁷, represent forms of individual exchange mainly of a verbal nature, others such as the 'lamentation' or 'lament', point to a close association between voice and song, while the 'exhortation' indicates an oral address between individuals but defined by "a dramatic evocation of emotional experience" (Kennelly, 1987:92). The 'interrogation', 'referral' and 'revelation' all, likewise, rely on a direct one-to-one verbal interaction. While each of these genres has a formal tradition which may be as much written as verbal, their shared relationship with patterns of verbal sound makes them primarily identifiable as verbal forms and, therefore, structurally important to the overall design of Mari's 'novel'.

The nature of Catholic 'confession' relies on the relationship between the speaker and the reader-as-listener, combining both the need of speaking one's guilt as well as that of being heard. Guilt and its ultimate outcome, redemption, give meaning to the 30 examples of this form to be found in *Rosso Floyd*. The 'confessions' are interspersed throughout the pages of the book in a way that can be described as being a "recuperation of voices" (Cubilie & Good, 2003:4) or elaboration on facts 'lost' to the 'historical' memory of the group. These 'confessions' cover the personal thoughts of each of the band members, mainly those closely related to Syd. "Confessione prima" ("First Confession") is in the voice of Richard William Wright, also designated as "L'uomo topo" ("The Mouse Man"), the second is David Gilmour, "L'uomo gatto" ("The Cat Man"), the third is Nick Mason, "L'uomo cane" ("The Dog Man"), the sixth Roger Waters, "L'uomo cavallo" ("The Horse Man"), the seventh Peter Watts-Alan Parsons, while the other confessional entries appear in varying combinations of these specific band members. Their proximity to Syd Barrett, the 'Diamond' at the core of the work – a link established in the first entry of the novel, ("Lamentazione prima oltremondana. I siamesi"[First Outer-worldly Lament. The Siamese Twins]) – determines these confessional pieces as the closest ring of consanguinity, as it were, to the founder of the band himself. The

⁷ Barzel refers to testimony as an "experiential form of discourse" (2002:160).

'guilt' of each individual towards the absent Syd is therefore voiced in the form of a 'first circle', or what could be equated with a musical theme⁸ underpinning all the other literary layers and threading through the work from beginning to end. The 'themes' of these confessional entries function as a returning constant does in a musical composition, which re-evaluates Genette's notion that "the only mode that literature knows is narrative, the verbal equivalent of non verbal events" (Genette & Levonas, 1976:4).

Music exists in time – not space – for the ear, being satisfied by a return to the main key of the piece and by a sufficient reminder of the matter of the main section – avoids losing interest in a mechanical re-statement of 'heard' material. (Davie, 1953:5)

The reader's interest in the personal confessional statement of each closely linked member of the band creates an equivalent to thematic scoring that binds the entire work around the figure of Syd Barrett himself.

The "testimony", the second form mentioned in the introduction of the book, is an entirely different literary-cum-verbal communication, which implies the external eye of an independent onlooker, designating to some degree a personal encounter and representing a different pattern of voice-to-writing experience. Closely identified with the biblical notion of remembering, with which *Rosso Floyd* is also closely linked, the testimony subsumes the idea of survival and "serves as a tool for uncovering hidden truths" (Park-Fuller, 2000:22). These testimonies present a 'history' formulated through the personal experience of the individual, "[that functions] as a valid human description" (Barzel, 2002:167). The 53 testimonies in *Rosso Floyd* stretch the reader's perceptions into the more important region of "one's *created* experience" (Park-Fuller, 2000:28. Italics in original), underlining the truly fictional nature of the text by bringing into the work a layer of imagined response in a dialogic correspondence that

⁸ "Themes [are] well defined melodies rather than organized groups of material" (Davie, 1953:11).

equates the antiphony in a musical score. These 53 testimonies can thus be described as a second circle of voices, or ancillary extras, at a further remove from the immediate founders of the group: impresario Peter Jenner, who quotes another early impresario of the group, manager Andrew King, choir master John Aldiss, drummer of the group Nice, David O'List, road manager Alan Parsons, who mentions the name of the deceased Peter Watts, another road manager for Pink Floyd in the tour for *The Dark Side of the Moon*, Julian Lennon "figlio di John" ("Son of John", "Testimonianza ottava"/"Testimony Eight"), creator of the special effects for the shows Peter Dinkley, singer Bob Geldof, stage designer Bob Ezrin (the same piece repeated twice to create an echo effect in the book), columnist Jason Coleman, Roger's brother and mother, Duncan and Mary Waters, friends David Gale and Nigel Lesmoir, Syd's childhood girlfriend Ann Murray, his sister and brother-in-law Rosemary and Paul Breen, the gnome whose picture accompanied many Pink Floyd visual pranks, celebrity photographer Michael Rock, friend Jack Monk who gives information on the years following Syd's expulsion from Pink Floyd, the caretaker of Syd's apartment block Ronald Salmon, television host John Peel, guitarist Clive Welham, drummer William Wilson, singer Eric Clapton, bassist Clive Metcalf, Syd's brother Alan Barrett, whose family connection entitles him to the privilege of the final testimony, in which he mentions Syd's death on a night when the full moon shone like a diamond⁹, thereby again picking up Syd's established designation.

The lamentation in particular is an expression of suffering and the subsidiary wish for the alleviation of that suffering. As a heightened form of emotional expression it is also, more than the others, associated with poetry or song. In *Rosso Floyd* the lamentation brings both a worldly and otherworldly dimension, a fusion between biographical content and Gothic form. The series of laments in the novel draws from a group of people that create yet another outer layer of Pink Floyd aficionados, those whose presence amongst the chosen has in some way been forbidden or peripheral.

⁹ "The papers didn't fail to note that that night the moon shone in the sky like a diamond" ["I giornali non han mancato di notare che c'era la luna piena, e che splendeva come un diamante nel cielo"] (Mari, 2010, Testimoniana trigesimoquinta. Alan Barrett (2)).

The first lament (“Lamentazione prima oltremondana. I siamesi”[First Outer-worldly Lament. The Siamese Twins]) echoes the otherworldly voices of the “Siamese twins”, Blues musicians Pink Anderson and Floyd Council, whose first names Syd Barrett ‘borrowed’ to designate Pink Floyd. The exchange of these two otherworldly voices introduces Gothic note, playing with the expectation embedded in the Siamese twins’ symbolism: the individual parts fuse to become the unit rather than the other way round, all shown here in a progressive accumulation of ‘sounds’. The second (“Lamentazione seconda. Arnold Layne”) is in the voice of the fictional character of Pink Floyd’s legendary first hit, Arnold Layne, a sexual pervert persona whose ‘outing’, in the song, results in his ‘ostracism’, in virtual ‘reality’, in the ‘recollected’ piece in *Rosso Floyd*. The double remove from identifiable reality – the ‘hidden’ secrets of a fictitious ‘identity’ captured in a pop song, but ‘remembered’ in a book of fiction about an actual band – runs the gamut of the word’s possibilities in fictional writing. The ‘voices’ of these pieces strongly echo the notion of absence and loss, so central to the nature of the lament. The three lamentations that follow; Bob Klose, whose voice discounts his importance as a founding member, Stuart Sutcliffe on the other hand taking up the subject from Bob Klose’s previous ‘voice’, laments his ill luck in dying young after founding the Beatles, Brian Jones who again picks up the previous speakers’ words, mentioning his own founding role in the Rolling Stones, all from the “olimpo dei pellicani” (“Olympus of the pelicans”), from which their ‘voices’ hail.

These ‘laments’ are therefore the history of the history, the voices of early band members whose departures resulted in a “fine della leggenda” (“the end of the legend”, “Lamentazione sesta. Chris Dennis”). Geoffrey Mottlow’s, peregrinations on the peripheries of other groups form the core of the dirge in “Lamentazione settima. Geoffrey Mottlow” (“Seventh lamentation. Geoffrey Mottlow”). The lament of Marzio Aquaviva calls on another peripheral circle – the internet fan club dedicated to Syd Barrett – while the twinned laments of the directors Kubrick and Antonioni recall the band’s work on their respective iconic films: *2001: Space Odyssey* and *Zabriskie Point*, drawing the film industry into the ‘novel’ in an ever widening circle

of linkages-as-absence to Syd, the 'diamond' at its core. Therefore, on this level of the lamentation the author adds yet another tonal layer to the 'novel', its recurrence based on absence equating a series of intermittent sounds on the periphery of the 'score'.

With the interrogations, exhortations, referrals, revelations, the novel introduces other forms of implied verbal communication into the ever-widening narrative circles. The 'interrogation' is structured around a one-to-one exchange based on verbal form of a confrontational nature ("sono furibondo, furibondo [I am furious, furious]"; "Interrogazione prima John Gordon"/"First interrogation John Gordon"), in which the nefarious deeds against Syd are questioned and evaluated ("che bisogno c'era di rovinare tutto dichiarando che quei pezzi non sono stati composti per Syd" ["what need was there to ruin everything by declaring that those pieces were not made for Syd"]), or the accusation by David Bowie, signed in the name of Ziggy, his show-world persona, on the disgraceful pleasures of gossip against Syd ("Ti piace spettegolare, eh..."[You like to speculate, don't you?], "Interrogazione seconda. David Bowie"/"Second interrogation. David Bowie). In the voice of Marzio Acquaviva in "Interrogazione terza. Marzio Acquaviva (2)", the reader finds an intertextual cross-reference accusing Roger Waters of deception ("prenderci in giro [making fools of us]") in a widening circle of voiced accusations. The exhortation introduces another level to the vocal layering of the piece. In "Esortazione prima. Michel Rémy", the supplication inherent in the exhortation form extends outwards, away from the nuclear nub of the band members to the fans or outer layer of the circle of relevance, in which these pieces extend the vocal expansion of the novel into ever-widening circles of sound surrounding the nucleus associated with the absent Syd Barrett.

Many more examples can be given from the text. Suffice it to say, however, that this so called 'novel' has been developed organically, from within, through the build-up of voices that create its many 'characters'. Each of these 'characters' is a voice rather than a fictitious 'person', a perspective that determines the narrative moment of each dialogic presence. Bakhtin defines the novel as a "diversity of speech types [or] a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (Bahktin, 1981:262). Each appearance of this 'voice' in

Rosso Floyd adds to the cumulative modulation of 'sound' that structures the novel. However, the 'voices' are not the only differentiation of perception that the novel offers the reader. Each entry is defined in its heading as a specific genre which both melds it to the whole while also allowing each entry to have its own, specific identification. The dichotomous distance between the sound of the voice and the written text is bridged by the titles of the pieces, which introduce the sounds of that voice through the identification of the genre, thereby linking the words and the written page. Like music which "is about the creation and organization of sounds and silences" (Smith, 1997:504), the titles of the genres introduce the sounds associated with that genre. For the reader the text has been a guide not just to the content of the history relating to Pink Floyd, but to the nature of writing, its integral functioning with the subject that it defines and its general form as a vehicle for the essence of the work itself.

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