

Book Review: Elizabeth Strout's *Lucy by the Sea*

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Elizabeth Strout is a successful and highly acclaimed contemporary American novelist: she is a Pulitzer prize winner and author of numerous novels, among which: *My Name Is Lucy Barton*; *Anything Is Possible*; *Oh, William!*. She has also been nominated for the PEN/ Faulkner Award and the Booker Prize. As such, her most recent best seller, *Lucy by the Sea* (Penguin Random House, 2022), commands particular attention.

This is a most unusual novel-reading experience, as if *in the making*, since it tells a story of our own world's *here and now*: the realistic *self-reflexive* story of an American lady novelist, in the days (and years) of the Coronavirus-19 pandemic. Lucy Barton works as a possible alter-ego of the writer herself. Hence the apparently easy-going, intimate tone of this book, as if it were (no more than) a memoir. And yet.

This volume asserts itself as an ambitious piece of today's American fiction, if we only consider the chances and challenges of classic *realism* now. It offers its readership an exquisite sample of *poetry of reality in prose of the mind*—if one may say so. It speaks (apparently) so directly about the dilemmas (and delights) of ageing, without forgetting its horrors (painful old memories included). As a *poem of reality in prose of the mind*, this is achieved as a candid *confessional* text, devoid of sensational sentimentalism, often likely to remind us of Sylvia Plath's haunting metaphorical voicing.

Lucy by the Sea represents today's version of a Bildungsroman, pursuing some growing-up itineraries, with close-up instances of family background from several generations of a (typical?) American family. This means: vivid literary characters standing for various kinds of social status (from sheer poverty to academic upper middle-class), national origin (from old Anglo-American stock to a former German Second World War prisoner of war), or level of education (from illiterate to university professor). Written from a first person narrative point of view, following Strout's novel *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, as if it were

a second volume of a traditional family *saga*, (which it is not), focused on and developed around this fictive woman writer, who is herself professionally engaged in rendering the multilayered narratives of this non-*clan*, Lucy's story brings these portraits all together: from Lucy's own mother and father, her sister and brother, to her first husband and then her second one, then her own mature daughters, Chrissy and Becka, their own husbands, their (never born) babies.

Lucy by the Sea may also represent a melancholy meditation upon a contemporary version of some "Roaring Twenties" in our own 21st century. The Covid pandemic is by no means the only trauma rendered here: complex political issues (George Floyd's death in May, 2020, and then the January 6, 2021 attack on US Capitol in Washington, D.C.) are being dealt with carefully, with great insight, as if to suggest that both sides of the story need to be considered. And yet, the fact that these (other) renderings of such recent upheaval become part of Lucy's story is tale-telling enough.

(The same) universal crucial questions are being asked here again, between the lines, such questions as: the *fear of eventually losing one's mind*; the frightening acute sense of *loneliness*; the chances of *believing in God*, in a world like ours, at a time like this; last but not least, ancient questions about *love* and its infinite (im)possibilities: from awkwardly expressed parental affection to offspring's desperate need for it; from "true" love to love betrayal, in a married couple; love failure, delusion; the ancient never quenching dream of love. This intricate psychological novel responds to the invisible reader's mind, or rather *corresponds* to it, since there can be neither an honest answer, nor a logical solution to such timeless dilemmas. This suggestion of empathy plays a strange game of *mise en abyme*, involving the anonymous reader, too, in the first person narrator's quest for the ever more blurred meaning of human existence. At least that, since Lucy's lucidity prevents her from any definition of happiness.

But then, *mise en abyme* is the main strategy within this metafictional novel: *motherhood* is reflected in infinite mirrors. From the duality of Lucy's mother: on the one hand, her actual mother, harsh and rarely (if ever) able to show tenderness with all her three kids; on the other hand, Lucy's "invented mother", the "nice mother" at the back of her mind, always supportive and ready to encourage her writing daughter. (This "invented mother" may some-how remind readers of Isabel Allende's book title, *My Invented Country*, likewise a book at the border between memoir and fiction. But then also of elegiac instances of mourning motherhood in Allende's works.) Then we have to contemplate Lucy's own career as a mother of two daughters, always affectionate and responsive to their problems. Further on, Lucy's first born daughter's, Chrissy's, pregnancy losses

several times, as another representation of *failed motherhood*. My point here is that Strout's novel can win over her feminine reader also by its talking about this life experience of motherhood as about something never to be taken for granted. A frank serious writer would/could never approach *motherhood* conventionally, and, obviously, Elizabeth Strout is one such writer.

In a chapter on the sublimely concise poetry of Emily Dickinson, Harold Bloom quotes a quip by Ludwig Wittgenstein: "Love is not a feeling. Love, unlike pain, is put to the test. One does not say: That was not a true pain because it passed away so quickly" (Bloom, 1995, p. 281). This can also apply here, to the numerous life stories crossing Lucy's mind in Elizabeth Strout's novel. Lucy meets many other literary characters, beside those of her family. Whether as friends or merely as random acquaintances, they leave a mark on her mind, claiming their episodic roles in this American panorama of the Coronavirus pandemic. Lucy is always just as witty as her own maker, the novelist. "It is a gift in this life"—Lucy says once—"that we do not know what awaits us" (Strout, 2022, p. 223). Yet a couple of chapters before, in a dialogue with William, her first husband, they confess to each other they share the suspicion that "everything has already happened", and that "there is no past, present or future". This return to the ancient (puritan) notion of predestination may be rather disquieting, yet it belongs to the book's *conversational* pattern. The Coronavirus-19 lockdown works as a good pretext for *conversational fiction*, in a well nuanced kaleidoscope mingling dialogue and soliloquy. This unprecedented lockdown experience becomes a multiple metaphor: we get to see lockdown as a trap, as confinement, as a weird time-out. At a certain point in the novel, Lucy realizes that somehow her entire childhood had been like a lockdown.

Whether as a desolate rural landscape (such as Amgash, Illinois, Lucy's birthplace), or as a seaside provincial one (such as Maine, Lucy's lockdown shelter), or as the super-metropolis of Manhattan, NYC (i.e. Lucy most beloved place under the sun), these all are colorfully evoked as so much more than suitable landscapes for powerful literary settings. And then *the sea itself*, as in some other grand 20th century books by certain lady writers with a deep philosophical bent: Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*; Iris Murdoch's novel *The Sea, the Sea*.

Lucy spends this time of crisis, the Covid lockdown, together with William, her first husband, in a rented house in Maine, "by the sea." William claims he wants to save her life. Their reconsidered togetherness, after divorce and loss of further life-partners, is in itself a strange story of mature friendship, "after all has been said and done." As a classic realistic novel, Strout's book also renders—without melodrama, just with a well-tempered

lyricism—Lucy’s and William’s unusual relationship with each one’s siblings. This opens another generous horizon of possible interpretations. Somewhere between sweet dream and nightmare, all of Lucy’s symbolical brothers and sisters, (her own invisible readers included), have had to face the same lockdown challenge; each one of them responds differently, and their fragments of dialogue, whether uttered or not, testify to their deep sense of insecurity.

As a unique book about “love in the time of the Coronavirus” (if one may paraphrase the title of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s world-famous novel about giving a second chance by the dusk of life, to a first love story, marked by the crisis of a deadly catching disease)—*Lucy by the Sea* has already asserted itself as a best-seller in the US. It is to be expected that Elizabeth Strout’s novel will be rewarded by an ever larger readership, provided it is translated by gifted keen professionals, too.

References

- Bloom, H. (1995) *The western canon: The books and schools of the ages*. Riverhead Books.
Strout, E. (2022) *Lucy by the sea*. Penguin Random House.