

Bridging Cultures, Intersecting Paths of Recognition: *Larabi's Ox: Stories of Morocco* (1992) by Tony Ardizzone

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Abstract

As well as being an academic, Chicago-born Tony Ardizzone is one of the most prominent American writers of Sicilian origin. In 1985 he travelled to Morocco and settled in Rabat, where he taught at Mohammed V University. As he has elucidated in more than one interview, he had no intention of writing about Morocco, even though, during his stay, he kept a diary. He travelled to Morocco a second time, in 1988, and, when he came back, he decided to weave some of the stories he had already started to draft into one collection of fourteen interlaced pieces, entitled *Larabi's Ox: Stories of Morocco*, re-issued in 2018 as *The Arab's Ox* to mark the 25th anniversary of the book publication.

As this essay sets out to demonstrate, by setting the collection in a foreign territory at the crossroads (between Europe, Africa, and the Arab world), by choosing American characters (not just Italian Americans) who are struggling to balance their identity in a country whose mores they do not fully understand, Ardizzone aims at casting light on the difficulties and the negotiations each person of ethnic origin has to grapple with, in his/her path of recognition in America.

Keywords: *Bridging Cultures, Italian Americans, Larabi's Ox, Otherness, Stereotypes, Tony Ardizzone.*

1. Introducing Tony Ardizzone and His Travels to Morocco

Described by Fred Gardaphé as "one of the best fiction writers of Italian descent" (Gardaphé 2014: 421), Tony Ardizzone is the acclaimed author of four novels and four short-story collections, as well as being an academic. In the early 1980s, while he served as a professor at Old

Dominion University in Norfolk (Virginia), he helped draft a proposal for a student/faculty exchange between his university and Mohammed V University in Rabat (Morocco). Since the proposal was accepted, he was sent there to teach, in the fall of 1985. As he elucidated in more than one interview, he “never intended to write a book about Morocco” (Marino 2017: 3), even though he kept a journal during his stay. When he returned to the US, he composed a story, “The Beggars,” then he crafted another narrative focused on an American tourist dying of cancer, followed by the story which lends its title to the volume this essay sets out to investigate: “Larabi’s Ox.” In the summer of 1988, Ardizzone travelled to Morocco a second time, to increase his knowledge of the place and its people: he visited Marrakesh, Ouarzazate, the Sahara Desert, while, previously, he had spent most of his time in Rabat, Fez, and Casablanca. When he came back, his recollections, observations, old and new pieces of writing were weaved together to form *Larabi’s Ox: Stories of Morocco*, a collection of fourteen interconnected stories first released in 1992 and then reissued in 2018, under the title *The Arab’s Ox, Stories of Morocco*, to mark the 25th anniversary of the book publication.

Despite the numerous awards it earned (it was honored with the Milkweed National Fiction Prize, the Chicago Foundation for Literature Award for Fiction, and the Pushcart Prize), remarkably few scholarly contributions have been devoted to the study of *Larabi’s Ox*, as if the volume, given its peculiar origin, structure, and setting, might somehow be overlooked as a curious diversion from the writer’s customary path, from his habitual exploration of Chicago’s changing neighborhoods, teeming with Italian American characters striving to balance tradition with modernity. In a 2011 interview, the author also lamented the reading public’s seeming lack of interest in his book, which he ascribed to the “less sensationalistic” (Wooden 2004) vision of Morocco it featured, if compared with the tantalizing and exotic one offered by writers such as Paul Bowles (who released *The Sheltering Sky* in 1949). Conversely, this essay first of all sets out to cast light on the

importance Ardizzone himself attached to the collection, as a necessary and unavoidable step towards the major theme of Italian emigration to America, which he would delve into in his 1999 masterpiece, *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*. Secondly, as will be shown, through the analysis of the three American protagonists' encounter with *Otherness*, with a foreign land which, in Shannon R. Wooden's words, functions as "a fourth main character" (Wooden 2004) in the volume, Ardizzone takes the opportunity to demonstrate that, once biases and stereotypes are overcome, difference may actually turn into a vitalizing force – a reflection that resonates with the struggle for recognition of every individual with an ethnic background in America.

2. *Larabi's Ox: The Three Main Characters and Their Progress*

Ardizzone's prolonged stays in Morocco enabled him to approach the land of his forefathers from a safety distance, without directly plunging into the trauma of exile and separation that affected his ancestors, when they ventured abroad. As he emphasized in an interview with Olivia Kate Cerrone,

when I went to Morocco for the first time, I was shocked by how familiar things there seemed to me. People would tell me things that they claimed were uniquely Moroccan, and I understood them almost immediately. For example, they'd talk about the Hand of Fatima, which wards off perception and protects against the evil eye, and I connected that with the *cornio*, with the *mano cornuta*. (Cerrone 2011)

In *Larabi's Ox*, "*mal'occhio*" – also known as "*occhio morto*" (Ardizzone 162) – is openly mentioned in the chapter entitled "The Hand of Fatima." In the same interview, the writer recalled his moment of epiphany and recognition of his roots when he realized that "his father's parents came from the African face of Sicily" (Cerrone 2011) and, therefore, "his approach to Sicily and Italian themes came from

Africa" (Cerrone 2011). In the late 1970s, Ardizzone had already jotted down-albeit unsuccessfully-some chapters of his "Italian book", a family saga set in Italy; as he remarked to Cerrone, "I knew that if I was able to write about Morocco maybe I could write *In the Garden*" (Cerrone 2011). And so, he did.

The structure of *Larabi's Ox* emblematically resembles a three-branched tree: in the initial story, the main characters, namely Henry Goodson, Peter Corvino, and Sarah Rosen, share the same bus headed from Casablanca airport to Rabat. Then, their paths diverge: Henry travels through the Atlas Mountains, Ouarzazate, and the Sahara; Peter spends most of his time in Rabat and Casablanca, while Sarah explores Fez and Marrakesh, thus offering readers a multiplicity of viewpoints and perspectives, a kaleidoscope of changeable perceptions which clash with the rigid, assimilative, and univocal nature of stereotypes. The three protagonists are at a turning point in their lives; for different reasons, they feel adrift, purposeless, emotionally crippled: hence, their trip to Morocco is depicted as a form of escape from disappointment and fear. Their gloomy frame of mind finds its objective correlative in the ox of the collection title, hit by the bus where they are all travelling (unaware of each other's burden of pain), and pushed into a ditch, where it slowly and painfully surrenders to death. Unlike the ox, however, through the regenerating contact with the Other, and the creation of a bond of sympathy between human beings, the three characters manage to pull themselves out of the metaphorical ditch where they are trapped and start life afresh.

Ardizzone focuses five of the stories on Sarah's progress. The beautiful, red-haired, Jewish American woman was originally meant to visit Morocco with her boyfriend Zach; they both were familiar with the prepackaged and preconceived image of a land popularized by Cosby, Stills & Nash's song entitled "Marrakesh Express," which Zach keeps on humming, conjuring in his mind visions of "charming cobras,"

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“colored cottons”¹ and intoxicating smoke. Sarah’s fascination with Morocco had actually started years before, when she had first read Anaïs Nin’s diaries. As the author underlines, the Morocco of her imagination, with its dark and labyrinthine medinas, looks like the dazzling background of a story from the *Arabian Nights*:

a magic place that smell[s] of cedar and the rarest oils, a land of azure skies, earth colored casbahs, carpets from Persian fairy tales. Veiled women, tiled fountains, handsome guides in canary-yellow slippers. (Ardizzone 1992: 67)

Sarah’s Orientalizing fantasies are also subtly infused with both theories of racial superiority and the alluring prospects of territorial expansion hinted at in travel narratives such as Edith Wharton’s *In Morocco*, Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad*, and George Orwell’s *Marrakesh*. Nonetheless, when she finds out that Zach is unfaithful to her, she resolves to leave on her own, for the very reason that everybody tells her she should not, only to prove she is not just a “Barbie doll” (71), the way her manipulative boyfriend has always considered her. Once in Morocco, dreams and illusions dissolve; she initially feels besieged by beggars, as if she were “bread tossed to a school of fish” (74). Moreover, in an interesting role reversal, which places her in the subordinate position normally held by fresh-off-the-boat immigrants in America, she is looked upon with scorn and suspicion, as she appears different. Her walking unchaperoned through the streets is labelled as transgressive and inappropriate; as the owner of a café remarks, according to the stereotypical conception of women disseminated through Hollywood movies, “American women [are] either daughters, or wives, or –” (104), and she surely falls into the last, unmentionable category, since she is alone and under no man’s protection. Just like a newcomer or an alien, who eventually learns the written and unwritten

¹ For the lyrics, see <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/crosby-stills-nash/marrakesh-express>.

rules of the host country the hard way, Sarah finally adjusts. She develops a romantic attachment with a Moroccan man whom she leaves when she feels their relationship has become too confining. She feels free to either remain or to go back to the US; she is no longer afraid to live *deliberately* (to quote Thoreau)² and truly be herself.

Even Henry undergoes a profound transformation after spending some months in Morocco. As readers gather, he suffers from an incurable stomach cancer and, as he quite bluntly says, he has travelled there, “plain and simple to die” (Ardizzone 1992: 130). In the first story focused on him, “The Unfinished Minaret,” he reveals his superficial attitude to life and his ignorance and disregard for customs and traditions other than his own. Incapable of savoring the experience, he keeps observing the novel environment through the filter of his predatory camera, which captures images and turns them into lifeless souvenirs. The mausoleum of Mohammed V, “the great king who led his country from colonialism to national independence and power” (54) according to his guide, Ahmed, is irreverently equated by him to “a birthday cake” (54). Prompted by his ravenous curiosity and desire to fix and objectify everything that surrounds him through his camera, he steps into every mosque, even during prayers, when he is not supposed to be there, out of respect for the worshippers. Ardizzone gradually pieces together the story of Henry’s life: indeed, he has always been a lonely man, neglected by everybody, bullied by his acquaintances, and unable to stand up for himself. Through the friendship he forms with Ahmed and his extended family, he eventually learns to see and appreciate the world through his own eyes: no longer obsessed by his camera, he longs to visit new places, to taste different dishes, to be emotionally fed with legends, with detailed accounts of how Ahmed’s uncle had walked to Mecca, awestruck by the magnificent sight that had opened before him. Before dying in the Sahara Desert, symbolically

² In *Walden or, Life in the Woods*, Henry David Thoreau wrote: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life” (Thoreau 1894: 143).

mingling his dust with the sand, he shares a moment of deep self-realization with Ahmed:

I worked for other people, always put myself last. [...] Oh Ahmed, I was a good donkey. Never complained, always on time, where I was supposed to be, the kind of guy who carried two pens in his shirt pocket in case one ran dry. Instead, I ran dry. I sold my life to the highest bidder. [...] The only true-to-myself thing I ever did was to come here to Morocco". (222)

Peter Corvino is another character who has seemingly lost the meaning of his existence. He calls himself "an academic burnout" (Ardizzone 1992: 90): he abhors his job as a professor of history, shamelessly declares he has not had any original idea for many years, hates his students and their enthusiasm, and cynically yearns to become chair of his department and then associate dean, to be able to retire with a decent pension. Even his trip to Morocco, aimed at establishing an exchange of resources and knowledge between universities, is supposed to help speed up his career advancement. Tired of their dysfunctional family life, Peter's wife has deserted him: his only way of communicating with her and their daughter is through postcards which, by definition, require no answer. Corvino's initial idea of the new country and its inhabitants is shaped through the stereotypical and prejudiced accounts of a French tourist, whom he first meets on board the plane to Casablanca. According to Alain Bornet, all Muslims are repulsive insects, who "crawl shoeless as [...] snake[s] into [their] mosque[s]" (32). In his view, poverty does not really exist in Morocco, and beggars deviously pretend to be physically disabled and in need. Thus strikingly echoing the racist portrayals of Italian immigrants featured in volumes such as Madison Grant's 1916 *The Passing of the Great Race*, allegedly proving the biological inferiority of the Mediterranean people (Figueira 2022: 10), Bornet maintains that the Arabs are not really *people*:

They are stupid as animals [...]. You see an Arab and his donkey, both filthy, covered with lice and fleas, loaded down with sacks of tangerines. You can't tell which drives the other. (Ardizzone 1992: 46)

At first, Peter adopts such lens and he is wary of the crippled child who approaches him begging for money; after all, some weeks later, he spots the same boy perfectly standing amidst the crowd. When he begins to actually *listen* to his Moroccan acquaintances, however, his deeply ingrained beliefs are challenged. Through Mohammed and his wife Aisha, a couple he meets because of the exchange program he is trying to set up, he learns that algebra was invented by the Arabs, that St. Augustine was a Berber, that "the Koran granted women economic rights a dozen centuries before European women were given the same" (92). As Mohammed elucidates, pointing at the limits of generalizations, "we are not all camel drivers or rug merchants, in the same way the people in your country are not all Texas cowboys or Manhattan millionaires" (84). Hence, the title of the story, "Exchange," acquires additional meanings. In Morocco, for the first time, Peter acts as a caring and selfless human being, becoming the foster father of the crippled child and his twin brother, whom he had mistakenly assumed to be the same person.

Conclusions: Bridging Cultures

As this essay has tried to demonstrate, *Larabi's Ox* is much more than a mere diversion, and certainly deserves critical attention, especially in times when wars and fundamentalisms (and a strong emphasis should be placed on the plural) are affecting intercultural communication. To conclude, Ardizzone's words in reply to the question "What can a reader relate to or learn by reading your book" (Wetherell 2018) deserve to be quoted in full:

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I hope the reader will come away with the affirmation that we're all human, worthy of love and respect, despite where we come from or what we believe. I also hope the reader will experience a sense of Moroccan culture as well as a greater understanding of Islam, a religion that I came to deeply respect. Finally, it would be great if it made them want to travel to Morocco, or if they've already been there I hope the book revives their memories. (Wetherell 2018).

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