

The Healing Properties and Perils of Travel, as seen in *Béton armé* by Philippe Rahmy

Béton armé is the story of a writer suffering from brittle bone disease who has left his native country for the first time. Because of the severity of his illness, any kind of travel presents a serious risk to his health and perhaps even his life. This particular journey is no small step out of the author's comfort zone: the destination, Shanghai, is one of the most fast-moving cities in the world, and consequently one of the most perilous places the author could possibly expose himself to. Added to this is the vast cultural disparity between the Chinese city and the author's home country, Switzerland, and the fact that the writer does not speak Mandarin. All these elements together make Shanghai a particularly hazardous and daunting setting for the text to take place in, and this element of extreme peril must be kept in mind in our reading of the text. Rahmy's stay in Shanghai is therefore a momentous event in his life as an individual. It is also, in turn, an important moment for his literary career: by journeying into a completely foreign world, he enters a realm of enormous new creative potential which well-travelled, able-bodied writers could only dream of.

His disease makes it uncertain that the Chinese Writers Association will allow him to make the journey, and he has to undergo extensive medical assessment to be admitted. When he discovers he has been accepted, we sense the almost childlike excitement he feels at the prospect of going abroad for the first time, as he closes the fourth chapter with the simple, single-word exclamation 'voyage!' (BA, 34) The natural curiosity we all have to exit our normal surroundings and discover new ones overcomes the writer's fear of the danger that the journey entails: Shanghai is one of the busiest, most brutal cities in the world, and presents an enormous threat to his fragile health. This choice to overlook peril for the sake of experience is ever-present throughout the text: the author literally disregards peril in not mentioning the injuries he sustained during his stay there. These injuries confined him to hospital for several months following his return from Shanghai, but he gives no hint of it in the book, and in his opinion, 'ceci ne concerne pas mon texte'¹. The choice to make the journey, and to defy his condition, is thus an empowering moment of self-emancipation whose poignancy we must not fail to note.

In his preface to *Béton armé*, Jean-Christophe Rufin comments that 'en notre siècle de vitesse et de facilité, Rahmy nous restitue un attribut qui fut longtemps propre au voyage : la difficulté' (BA, 11). To Rufin, *Béton armé* is reminiscent of exploration narratives of the 15th and 16th Centuries, of texts about life-endangering journeys bound towards an entirely New World. The comparison is an apt one, and Rahmy's narrator compares himself Columbus (BA, 16) in the opening pages of the text as a reminder

¹ Rahmy, 13th March 2015

of this sense of difficulty that we as readers may not at first grasp. It also illustrates the greatness of the impact this journey has upon him as an individual, and the vast emotive space between Shanghai and everything he was familiar with before it. When considering the constrained way in which he spent his childhood, shackled by protective measures against his disease, we may begin to understand the extent to which Shanghai really is a 'new world' for him. This is not only a long-haul flight for the author, but a plunge, headfirst, into the unknown.

Before the journey - context of closeted existence

The description Rahmy gives of his childhood is one of utter restriction: 'j'ai grandi sous un casque, sanglé à un matelas' (MPLF, 46). The syntax of this sentence, placing 'sous' immediately after 'grandi', seems to undermine any sense of growth at all, his moral development being stunted by his being barricaded in from the real world. Later in *Béton armé* the narrator reminds us of this extreme physical vulnerability by mentioning the weight of his skeleton: 'le poids d'un enfant de six mois, le poids de ma vie d'adulte' (BA, 32). This combination of infantile defencelessness and adult clarity of mind is what fascinates Rufin in his preface to *Béton armé*: this fascination is reflected in the preface's title, *Une jouvence du regard*. The utter novelty of Rahmy's viewpoint is made absolutely clear with the question, 'A quoi ressemble ce qu'on n'a jamais vu?' (BA, 17) For the average reader, it is with similar eye opening novelty that we experience the details about the author's physical condition: since most of us are unfamiliar with the disease, Rahmy's description of it takes us by surprise.

The freshness of the perspective of the narrator faced with these new experiences is coupled with a striking honesty: there are moments in which the poet seems to confide in the reader, using short sentences with simple structure and repetitive devices like anaphora to create a remarkably truthful tone: 'j'ai plus de quarante ans. Je n'ai jamais voyagé' (BA, 48). In her essay *On Being Ill*, Virginia Woolf comments on the 'childish outspokenness' of illness narratives, calling illness 'the great confessional' and observing that when one is ill, 'things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals.'² Rahmy's transparency of style in these instances certainly reflects an element of the confession Woolf describes. Elsewhere in *Béton armé*, he alludes to this openness in an invocation to the city: 'Shanghai, je me confesse à toi' (BA, 191).

Just as Rahmy spent his childhood strapped to a mattress, the narrator gives the impression he is strapped at once to birth and to death. He talks about the pain of being born as a harsh removal from the safety and comfort of the mother's womb, something we all undergo but mostly quickly forget about and recover from. In the case of a sufferer from brittle bone disease, on the other hand, 'la douleur de naître' (BA, 31) never ends,

² Woolf, 11

as being expelled from the womb into the harsh outside world never ceases to be just as dangerous as it is to a newborn baby, and life is a perpetual re-enactment of the first trauma of their birth. This danger in turn keeps death a constant threat. The result is a narrative in which the reader senses vulnerability and instability, in which frequent antitheses and paradoxes remind us that our expectations may be contradicted at any time, and that like the narrator, we cannot take anything for granted.

Fantasy literalized: a journey of words

While in *Mouvement par la fin* the only relief the narrator searches for is the ultimate ending of his pain in death, in *Béton armé* the little boy finds solace in language and in literature. As his physical movement was restricted, he says 'mes mots ont été mes bras et mes jambes' (BA, 61). Like the sickly young Marcel in *Combray*, the sound of Philippe's mother's voice reading stories at his bedside transports the child via his imagination in a way that his arms and legs cannot. The thrill of this 'travelling' through stories, broadening the horizons of his imagination, brings with it an increased sense of his own potential to somehow overcome his illness. The narrator identifies himself strongly with these stories: they are in fact what he describes as the foundation of his being. 'Peu à peu, ces barres compactes de lettres ont remplacé mon maigre squelette' (BA, 64). Here, rejecting the insubstantiality of his body in reality, the author turns to language as a means of reconstructing the self.³ As he states later in *Béton armé*, 'ce qu'on écrit dépasse ce qu'on est' (BA, 194): literature is a powerful tool for transcending the physical and unlocking multiple alternative perceptions of reality. It also opens up space for self-discovery and recreation of one's own identity, to the point where, for Rahmy, the self does not pre-exist writing: his literary goal, to this end, is 'écrire la vie, non la décrire' (BA, 195).

In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur W. Frank observes that in illness narratives, authors often 'meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to *use* it.'⁴ This notion of illness having an instrumental value in writing is evident in Rahmy, with his disease being a rich source of creativity from which much of his work has sprung: as Elisabeth Franck-Dumas points out, 'ses trois livres tournent en orbite autour de son mal'⁵.

³ Jan Morris also explores a synchronized relationship between literature and life in her book, *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*. She writes, 'birth and death are the ultimate bookends, and between them a muddled narrative unfolds' (Morris, 185). Here, too, literature seems to be a means of attaining an alternative reality: through the power of words, the writer is able to surpass restrictions imposed on them in real life. In Jan Morris' case, she makes Trieste home for the 'citizens of nowhere' (Morris, 187) through her writing of the book, a resting place for individuals who, like her, are otherwise unsettled in society.

⁴ Frank, 115

⁵ Franck-Dumas, 30th August 2013

Literature does not only console him and bring him strength in the face of his disease, but his disease also unlocks creative potential in him as a writer, interconnecting the two. In *Mouvement par la fin* the narrator explains this unique bond that makes Rahmy's narrative voice so haunting: 'ma parole n'exprime pas mon mal, elle est mon corps malade' (MPLF, 54).

When Rahmy travels to Shanghai, the city appears to him as a completely new source of poetic inspiration, and therefore adds to the literary 'substructure' described in the aforementioned metaphor. When the narrator states, 'mon corps est un alliage de ville et de parole' (BA, 135), it seems he has disregarded the physical deficiencies of his body altogether, identifying only with literature and the city. On his journey, he feels accompanied by texts that have influenced him earlier in life, particularly *Un Barbare en Asie* by Henri Michaux, which like *Béton armé* tells of a journey to Asia and at the same time a journey to the self. Rahmy writes that Michaux 'm'a inspiré, guidé tout au long de mon voyage en Chine'⁶, and Michaux's work plays a significant role in the intertextual layering of *Béton armé*. Like Michaux, Rahmy finds something intrinsically poetic in China and in the Chinese language, stating 'la Chine et la poésie ne forment alors plus qu'un' (BA, 169). When Michaux writes about the inherent poetry of the Chinese language in *Un Barbare en Asie*, he also plays on a relationship between words and space: 'chaque mot est un paysage'⁷. This once again reflects China's ability to widen a writer's creative horizons: it is a vast, fertile land of new sounds and ideas.

Hybridism and the effect of the other

The relationship between the narrator and his surroundings, between otherness and the self, is a central theme of *Béton armé*. Rahmy describes his text as being grounded upon a 'bascule entre monde extérieur et monde intérieur'⁸, and for a narrator with such fragile defences against the outside world this 'bascule' is invasive and intense. We are continually reminded of the role of his illness in this aspect of the narrative: one of the first things Rahmy sees when he arrives in Shanghai is a group of vendors selling bones. This image, though gruesome, instantly introduces the possibility that the trip may allow him to adopt a stronger 'other' with which to arm himself through his travels here and in the wider world thereafter. In the flurry of difference and foreignness of Shanghai, it quickly becomes clear that the narrator does not find strangeness only in these new surroundings, but also within himself. This strangeness, both within and without, continually triggers new reasons to write for the author. Peter Brooks comments on the creative potential of otherness within the self, too: 'we still don't know the body. Its otherness from

⁶ Rahmy, 13th March 2015

⁷ Michaux, 162

⁸ Rahmy, 13th March 2015

ourselves, as well as its intimacy, make it the inevitable object of an ever-renewed writing project.⁹

The opening pages of *Béton armé* are a sensory overload that contrasts starkly to the slow, heavy tone of *Mouvement par la fin*, reflecting their opposition in narrative position. In *Béton armé*, the narrator is completely alien to his surroundings, and we get the impression that he feels he is in the midst of an intimidating unknown power. 'Comme la vache qui regarde passer les trains, je ne comprends pas ce que je vois.' (BA, 16) Having grown up on a farm in Switzerland, what he is now faced with is a strange, loud, fast-moving and all-consuming monster. The difficulty he experiences in taking in what he sees is shown by a tricolon of adjectives: 'l'univers délirant, opaque, incompréhensible de Shanghai' (BA, 50). The sharp juxtaposition between his rural background and the urban space he is now in is also shown in the fifth chapter, when from his hotel window at night the aerials on the rooftops appear to him as a forest of dead trees (BA, 37).

The emphasis Rahmy places on the difference between Shanghai and his homeland, between the Chinese and himself, once again reminds us that because of his illness and consequent limited experience of the outside world, the encounter with otherness is more extreme for him than we might imagine. This drastic confrontation with diversity causes the narrator to re-examine his own identity and his preconceptions on the idea of strangeness. This is a theme Michaux is also concerned with in *Un Barbare en Asie*, and Michaux's narrator grows to love the sense of otherness he experiences in China. The epigraph of *Béton armé* highlights this: 'Il me plaît, quant à moi, de penser que ... la Chine sera toujours différente' (BA, 13). Rahmy, too, becomes fascinated with this sense of otherness both within himself and in the world around him: both writers express this exhilaration in their descriptions of China, using paradoxical, abundant imagery, with surprising and contradictory combinations of adjectives: 'la douceur déchirante, décomposante, le goût des larmes, le raffinement douloureux de la grâce'¹⁰ ; 'le monde qui s'ouvrait était si dense, si riche, si beau, si terrible, si doux'¹¹.

Fractured identity and hybridism play important roles in *Béton armé*. The narrator himself seems to reveal several splits in his own identity. Heredity is a significant factor in this divided self-portrait: he inherited his genetic disease from his father, but many further splits in his family history seem to suggest that inner schisms of other kinds also run in his family. Marital splits are a recurrent theme: his mother left his father, and his father's mother also left his father's father. Split nationalities and cultural divisions also repeat in his family history: both his parents and his father's parents originate from different countries; his French grandmother dramatically fled his Egyptian grandfather, disappearing into the desert at night, to escape the oppressive Muslim regime he imposed on her (BA,

⁹ Couser, 288

¹⁰ Michaux, 191

¹¹ Rahmy, 13th March 2015

190). Before his own parents' divorce, Rahmy describes a similar clash between his parents when his mother is devastated by his father's decision to circumcise him against her will ('la bataille a continué à la maison' (BA, 125)).

Perhaps the most striking image of hybridism in *Béton armé* is the harrowing childhood scene where Rahmy's grandfather attempts to cure his disease by forcibly injecting him with animal stem cells. The trauma of this experience leaves the child feeling like an outcast from mankind, as if a part of his humanity has died. Unlike the details about his family, this indicates a more chronic rupture of identity, placing the author outside the boundaries of 'normal' humanity: 'j'étais devenu mi-enfant, mi-animal' (BA, 127). This image retains a sense of innocence and helplessness while giving a disturbing sense of monstrosity at the same time. Bestiality is a theme frequently revisited in *Béton armé*: the helmet he is forced to wear throughout his childhood earns him the nickname 'rhinocéros' (BA, 62): this thick layer of 'cuirasse' (BA, 62) is a barrier between him and other children, leaving him with a sense of loneliness and of being a misfit from an early age. For the same reason, during a visit to the zoo in Shanghai, he identifies with the caged animals he sees there ('ces animaux sont comme les écrivains. Ils se cachent derrière leurs voix' (BA, 124)). The furry-footed duck on the Shanghai flag is also a point of self-identification for the author as a symbol of physical deformity ('créature inutile, ni comestible, ni décorative, mais à laquelle on ne peut que s'attacher' (BA, 134)).

In addition to animal imagery, the author goes so far as to remove himself from the land of the living altogether. When he describes the moment of the injection, he says 'cet instant est celui de ma mort' (BA, 127). Fixation with death is one of the principal themes of *Mouvement par la fin*, too, in which the narrator's disease creates an indestructible barrier between him and healthy, living human beings. In *Béton armé*, Rahmy adds that the moment of the injection is 'celui de ma naissance en tant qu'écrivain' (BA, 127): the oxymoronic statement places his identity as a human being and that as a writer in opposition, suggesting that as a writer he is somehow inhuman, and not 'alive' in the same sense as other human beings. Once again, this identifies disease as a key source of the writer's creativity. His sense of 'otherness', of fractured identity, of being not quite human, are necessary contributing factors to his literary career. We are reminded of Baudelaire's *L'Albatros* here, in which the identity of a poet is compared to that of an ugly creature, whose abnormal physical appearance is a symbol of the poet's extraordinary way of thinking. Rahmy's self-conscious description of himself as half-beast is reminiscent of the 'maladroits et honteux' birds Baudelaire portrays; Baudelaire's 'infirmes qui volait'¹² may therefore be compared to Rahmy's sick body and its potential to unlock extraordinary creativity. Rahmy comments on the distance he places between the narrator and the rest of humanity, reflecting the paradoxical nature of this conflict: 'Je ne veux que m'abandonner à notre vieille humanité et lui résister, et la contredire de toutes mes forces, et traduire

¹² Baudelaire, 9-10

cette contradiction dans mes textes.'¹³

Shanghai introduces a new dimension of hybridism in the author. The city pulsates with the clash of opposing forces, all of them totally foreign to the writer. Having explored the notion of strangeness within himself, this strangeness that now surrounds him fascinates him: in fact, paradoxically, it is in the 'alien' qualities of Shanghai Rahmy sees reflections of himself. Philippe Delaroche sees 'un saisissant autoportrait'¹⁴ in Rahmy's presentation of the city for this reason, calling the author's body a 'capitale de la douleur'¹⁵. Here we are reminded of the importance Michaux attached to reflection on the self in *Un Barbare en Asie*, which in the words of Maxime Huard is 'un important mouvement de retour sur soi'¹⁶.

The references to Rahmy's past and genealogy in *Béton armé* are full of oppositions and conflict, making them comparable to his description of the natural resources of Shanghai: speaking about the water that flows underneath the city, he says it is a 'mélange de forces contraires' that 'contient son histoire' (BA, 150). He describes his love of this conflicting aspect of Shanghai in an oxymoronic metaphor: 'Je suis amoureux de la Chine. Je partage son quotidien d'étincelles et de noirceur.' (BA, 175) He also believes he has 'un ancêtre en commun' (BA, 191) with China: on this subject Sébastien Rongier comments that 'l'expérience littéraire de Shanghai est une plongée ... dans ses racines.'¹⁷ This is particularly interesting considering the important role of literature in the narrator's self-identification, since much of China's literary past was obliterated during the Cultural Revolution. Rahmy takes account of this, calling China 'un fossile sans mémoire' (BA, 100): yet another oxymoronic image that links the composite narrator to this complex country. Michaux, too, comments on this paradoxical aspect of China, calling it a 'vieux, vieux peuple d'enfants'¹⁸. The theme of juxtaposing adulthood with childhood in Michaux here creates yet another point of comparison between Rahmy's narrator and China.

Rahmy also finds parallels between the oppressive political regime of Shanghai and the oppression he suffers at the hands of his disease. He comments that 'le communisme détruit la personne' (BA, 140), and this violent image of destruction is reminiscent of the devastating images in both *Béton armé* and *Mouvement par la fin* to describe his disease's capacity to obliterate the sufferer (the verb 'briser' (MPLF, 10; 36; 46) is particularly frequent in his treatment of this theme). As often is the case in *Béton armé*, however, there is a paradox in the author's view of the city: although he feels the oppressive and restricting aspects of the political system of the city very deeply, once politics are set aside, the author's

¹³ Rahmy, 13th March 2015

¹⁴ Delaroche, 23rd September 2013

¹⁵ Delaroche, 23rd September 2013

¹⁶ Huard, 59

¹⁷ Rongier, 15th September 2013

¹⁸ Michaux, 163

experience of the city seems to be both emancipating and strengthening. He seems to welcome part of the city into his composite identity: while before he described literature as steel and concrete substitutes for his skeleton, the real steel and concrete of Shanghai now seem to become a part of him too. This is further evidence of the hybrid and unstable nature of the narrator's identity being a source of creativity, and of travel being an immensely useful tool in gaining access to more and more extreme elements of this creative hybridism. The idea of identifying oneself with a foreign place is also evoked by the epigraph for Jan Morris' book, a quotation from *Tea at the Palaz of Hoon* by Wallace Stevens:

*I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself.*¹⁹

It is unsurprising that a text produced upon so many layers of otherness should have such a hybrid style and leave the reader wondering which genre it can possibly classify under. This travel journal is also at once philosophical, political, autobiographical and poetic, and rarely settles on one style for long. Rahmy comments on the flexible position of the narrative voice in relation to his fast-moving surroundings ('le mouvement qui s'établit entre l'intime et le public, est pendulaire, il permet à la voix narrative de passer d'un monde à l'autre'²⁰), and this may partly explain the tendency of his genre to mutate as the text progresses. The broken continuity of style is also undoubtedly a reflection of the author's disease, especially considering the narrator's concern with literature and the body intertwining to form a space of combined writing and identity. Arthur Frank explores this theme in *The Wounded Storyteller*: 'People telling illness stories do not simply describe their sick bodies; their bodies give their stories their particular shape and direction.'²¹

Breaking free and the fascination of violence

The subtitle of *Béton armé (Shanghai au corps à corps)* is a challenge between Rahmy and the city: the violence of the place demands for a survival instinct to emerge and fight. Originally, Rahmy intended to reserve the title *Béton armé* for a book about a soldier suffering from war trauma²² which he later left unfinished: this illustrates how important the theme of violence is in the text. The brutality of Shanghai is immediately perceptible in *Béton armé*: the city is teeming with unpredictable danger, and presents a constant threat to its inhabitants. A particularly striking image of the city is 'la ville est un couteau en équilibre sur sa pointe' (BA, 70). The sense of combined fragility and aggression evoked by this metaphor permeates the narrative voice at several moments in the text, showing the link between the narrator and the city.

¹⁹ Morris, v

²⁰ Rahmy, 13th March 2015

²¹ Frank, 27

²² Rahmy, 13th March 2015

A common theme between *Béton armé* and *Un Barbare en Asie* is the disparity between French and Chinese culture in terms of attitude to death. Both Rahmy and Michaux comment on the apparent indifference the Chinese people have to death: 'Les Chinois tuent et se font tuer calmement' (BA, 110) ; 'Le Chinois regarde la mort sans aucun tragique'²³. This casual proximity with death is ostensibly a great peril for Rahmy, who has spent all of his life previous to the journey in sheltered conditions, unable to look death in the face. In Shanghai, the author feels the closeness of death in a way he has never experienced before, and seems refreshed by the transparency of it: 'La rue dit la vérité. Elle parle comme un enfant de douze ans.' (BA, 74) Everything about China seems to be presented as more aggressive, more transparent, more confrontational than the Western world the narrator is used to. Rahmy and Michaux are not alone in this analysis, and Claudel even sees a trace of this in the Chinese language: 'la lettre chinoise est vue de face ... la lettre latine est vue de profil'²⁴. Laurent Jenny continues, 'là où la lettre court, le caractère chinois fait front. Il nous regarde de face ... en une sorte de duel têtu d'être à être.'²⁵ This aggressive frankness presents itself to Rahmy as a challenge, both as a diseased individual to fight back against his condition, and as a writer to make a conquest of the new creative potential the trip to Shanghai is offering him.

Not only does the shock of the narrator's clash with the city seem to have an invigorating effect on him, but we get the impression violence holds a certain natural fascination for the narrator. Shanghai triggers a childhood memory in which his father forces him to shoot dead a rabbit: this experience gives the abnormally frail child a thrilling sense of power, temporarily allowing him to forget the weakness of his body and feel like a dominant being (BA, 106). Later, when a homosexual boy makes advances on him at school, the young Rahmy attacks the other child, breaking his own hands simply to show the other children he is capable of being a dominant male, that he is stronger than the other child who is a social minority due to his homosexuality. The scene described is extremely unpleasant, yet the narrator concludes the account with the phrase, 'J'aime ce plus beau souvenir d'enfance.' (BA, 108). This unsettling relationship with violence can be considered as a primal desire for power and strength that is only realised very occasionally in the narrator's life. At times, the survival instinct takes over the narrative in aggressive phrases such as the following: 'je ne pense à rien. Je vis ... Je ferai tout pour survivre aux gens que j'aime' (BA, 24-25). The breaking down of ethical boundaries is also emancipating for the writer: just as words act as his arms and legs when he is unable to move his body, literature provides a moral freedom that is unattainable in the real world. As he declares later in the text, 'La morale n'existe plus quand on écrit' (BA, 123).

²³ Michaux, 157

²⁴ Jenny, 130

²⁵ Jenny, 130

Rahmy's trip to Shanghai presents the narrator with an overload of violent thrills unlike anything he has previously experienced. When he writes a health warning to himself on a cigarette packet reminding himself not to let the city seduce him (BA, 71), this is an indication of the relationship between temptation and danger. The semiological link between urbanisation and seduction is denoted by Roland Barthes in *L'Aventure semiologique*, as he draws parallels between 'éroticisme' and 'socialité': 'la ville, essentiellement et sémantiquement, est le lieu de rencontre avec l'autre.'²⁶ Rahmy touches on the erotic potential of his urban portrait by describing the thriving sex trade in Shanghai, where prostitutes bombard him with flyers advertising their favours, slipping them under his door on a nightly basis. The subtitle of the *Béton armé* also carries ambiguous connotations of the 'encounter' with the city, at once dangerous and seductive.

The relationship between *eros* and *thanatos* is visited by Rahmy frequently in both *Béton armé* and *Mouvement par la fin*. For an individual whose health is endangered by any kind of physical contact, the link is easy to divine. In *Mouvement par la fin* Rahmy describes his young self as an 'enfant qu'une caresse suffisait à briser' (MPLF, 46), powerfully highlighting the physical isolation of the child and the consequent difficulties of both physical and emotional intimacy for the narrator growing up. The difficulties in the narrator's sexual development are also discussed in *Béton armé*, when once again his father tries in vain to force the child's masculinity to emerge by giving him pornographic magazines, which, much to his father's frustration, do not arouse much interest him (BA, 93). In *Mouvement par la fin*, the narrator's illness physically restrains him from forming loving relationships with those around him, and prison imagery is used to describe this: 'l'amour est dans l'air à jamais prisonnier' (MPLF, 33). Perversely, it seems the narrator's most intimate relationship is with his illness itself. There is an unsettlingly sensual element to his relationship with pain, as he explains: 'La douleur est un chemin libre d'un nouvel amour. Mille tourments subis, mille baisers en retour' (MPLF, 19). This masochistic element of the narrative is in keeping with the prisoner metaphor, as the relationship with his illness appears to be a sort of Stockholm syndrome: he explains, 'J'aime la douleur à laquelle je ne peux échapper' (MPLF, 39). Elsewhere, desiring pain is a method for the narrator of taking revenge on it, as if it is an enemy who can only be destroyed by his refusal to acknowledge the harm it does him: 'Lorsque je peux désirer la douleur, je la sens briser avec moi' (MPLF, 36).

Exiles and Homecomings

The opening sentence of *Béton armé*, 'Shanghai n'est pas une ville' (BA, 15), is a strikingly oneiric statement that negates of the reader's understanding of reality. It instantly transports the reader into the realm of uncertainty and encounters between the real and unreal to which Rahmy's entire work seems to belong. This alienating effect leaves the reader with the desire for

²⁶ Barthes, 269

an explicit definition of Shanghai which the author will never give: what we are told is that in the world of the author even the most basic realities are fragile, the foundations we take for granted can be broken. This fragility links the narrator to the city: just as he claims Shanghai is not a city, he gives the impression he is not entirely a man. He is at once half-animal, embodied literature, both dead and alive.

Rahmy's sense of not fitting in with expected norms is shared by Jan Morris in *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*. Having first gone to Trieste as a male soldier, her return as a woman creates a sense of changeable identity similar to that of the narrator of *Béton armé*. Like in Rahmy, this uncertainty of the self is expressed through an alliance of identity between Morris' narrator and the city. She writes in her epilogue, 'much of this little book, then, has been self-description. I write of exiles in Trieste, but I have generally felt myself an exile too.'²⁷ Rahmy, too, plays with imagery of exile, dissociating himself with all national identities at several moments in *Béton armé*: once the narrator believes he is Chinese due to extreme inebriation ('Je suis perdu. Je suis heureux. Je suis chinois' (BA, 81)); at another moment he evokes a sense of exile by feeling homesickness even for the place he is currently situated in ('La France me manque. La Chine me manque encore plus' (BA, 161)). The alienating effect of this statement is heightened by the fact that his true home country, Switzerland, goes unmentioned. At times, China seems to separate from the world completely for Rahmy, becoming an isolated and incomprehensible 'ailleurs' (BA, 48). This, too, reminds us of Henri Michaux, in whose text even the title places the narrator at a distance from everybody who surrounds him, in the isolated position of the 'barbare'.

Elsewhere, however, Rahmy portrays himself as an outcast while linking himself to the rest of humanity at the same time: 'Je n'ai pas de ville natale. Le peuple est ma demeure.' (BA, 170) This statement contradicts the sense he gives elsewhere in the text of not belonging with the people around him, instead laying emphasis on his humanity. The common root that brings humans together in Rahmy is the fact that they all suffer in the same way: whether to a greater or lesser extent, everyone is familiar with pain. He gives this as the reason for not hiring an interpreter on his trip to Shanghai, claiming that 'la douleur est la langue commune' (BA, 31). In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry argues instead that 'physical pain ... actively destroys language, deconstructing it into the pre-language of cries and groans'²⁸. Although the two ideas seem to contradict each other in terms of pain's capacity to be a form of language, they are concordant in the sense that physical suffering is something primal which all humans can relate to, that they can understand without the aid of any complex use of language. Rahmy makes use of this to moving effect in *Mouvement par la fin*, when the narrator demands the reader's sympathy with the cuttingly brief sentence, isolated on its own line on the page:

²⁷ Morris, 186

²⁸ Scarry, 172

'Je crie.' (MPLF, 43)

Language, or lack thereof, is a theme that Rahmy is particularly concerned with in his work. When commenting on *Béton armé*, he lays emphasis on the notion of translation as an essential part of the writing process of the text, as the experiences of the trip are so foreign to the narrator that he struggles to find the words to express them. 'La plupart du temps, j'étais incapable de trouver les mots, le mot juste pour la chose... alors je plongeais en moi-même, selon la logique des associations d'idées qui finissent par aboutir au souvenir et à le réveiller.'²⁹ This brings to mind once again the striking intimacy of this text, reiterating that it is not only a question of reconstructing a journey but an eye-opening commitment of the self onto paper. Henri Michaux's influence on Rahmy is relevant here, as he was inspired by Michaux's message at the end of *Un Barbare en Asie*, 'À l'avenir, soyez votre propre lumière, votre propre refuge'³⁰.

To refer back to Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill* explores the barriers in communication created by illness too. Woolf acknowledges that 'incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness'³¹, also alluding to the difficulty we have in explaining our pain through language³², and suggests that only poets may be capable of expressing it accurately due to the higher importance of sounds with respect to meaning which is present in poetry more than in prose. Since the seriously ill are more capable of appreciating the sounds of words than of grasping their meaning, she creates a link between the sick and the foreign: 'Foreigners, to whom the tongue is strange, have us at a disadvantage. The Chinese must know the sound of *Antony and Cleopatra* better than we do.'³³ By suggesting that when we are ill we are alienated from the rest of humanity, Woolf anticipates the outsider effect nurtured in Rahmy's illness narratives.

Rahmy's slightly grim notion that all humans are united by the bonds of pain is reminiscent of Baudelaire's *Au Lecteur*, which focuses on vice as the common root of humanity. The final words of *Au Lecteur*

*Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,
— Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère!*³⁴

seem to be echoed by Rahmy both in *Béton armé* and particularly *Mouvement par la fin* when the narrator apostrophises all those who suffer

²⁹ Rahmy, 13th March 2015

³⁰ Rahmy, 13th March 2015

³¹ Woolf, 21

³² Thomas Couser comments on the consequences this difficulty has on illness in literature, noting that 'to describe pain convincingly ... is notoriously difficult to do' (Couser, 195)

³³ Woolf, 22

³⁴ Baudelaire, 6

(‘Toi qui souffres ... frère, soeur ... tu connais ce passage qui plonge tes yeux dans l’obscurité’ (MPLF, 52-55)).³⁵ This is a dramatic ethical gesture, as the narrator reaches out to the reader and calls upon their shared mortality: it is a particularly striking moment considering the narrator’s frequent alienation of the reader in other parts of the texts. However, at the end of *Béton armé*, the narrator’s invocation to his dead childhood friend (‘ami, frère’ (BA, 203)) is almost a positive rewriting of this: instead of telling of damnation and suffering, here he tells his friend of the beginning of his soul’s journey as a rather Dantesque ‘ascension au milieu des étoiles’ (BA, 203).

The Quest Narrative - Eurydice in Reverse

For all Rahmy’s fixation with perils, violence and death, the idea of rebirth is a central element to his trip to Shanghai. We first discover this on his arrival in the city, when he graphically describes a hallucinatory scene in which a pregnant woman he sees gives birth to him in the street: ‘C’est maintenant la vie incarnée ... qui m’enfonce la tête entre les cuisses de cette femmes, à l’intérieur de son ventre ... et qui me fait naître à six heures du soir, là, dans cette rue’ (BA, 18). The image is particularly violent considering that at Rahmy’s real birth many of his bones were shattered with the impact and his life was seriously endangered. The image is a frightening one, suggesting that the author is vulnerable and ill equipped to cope with this new, alien place that presents so many dangers to him. However there is also a sense of purging to this experience: of shrugging off some of the vulnerability he had before the journey and developing the tough moral exterior these new surroundings demand.

The physical rebirth of the narrator is not the only moment in which we get the impression that the journey to Shanghai gives the narrator a positive outlook on the future. Towards the end of the book Rahmy introduces the image of a phoenix: ‘quelque chose se termine et renaît sur ses cendres ... à la croisée des chemins, quelque part entre Shanghai et un souvenir d’enfance’ (BA, 198). This is commented on by Arthur Frank as a common trope in what he categorizes as ‘quest’ illness narratives. He says that in the image of the phoenix, ‘individual change ... is emphasised, with the author as an exemplar of this change’³⁶: this is not a change of ruin and destruction, but of a new beginning, literally rising out of the ashes of the old, flawed body to begin a new lease of life. He continues, ‘the Phoenix does not mourn what lies in its ashes’³⁷, explaining that it is an expression of the author’s letting go of the past: just as China is ‘sans mémoire’ (BA, 100), the phoenix has no memory.

Béton armé is not overtly a quest story, and often seems more like an aimless *flânerie*, as the narrator wanders through the city, recording his observations and the memories Shanghai triggers of his past with no

³⁵ For clarification of Baudelaire’s influence on Rahmy see BA, 63

³⁶ Frank, 123

³⁷ Frank, 136

particular end goal in sight. We may even suspect that the end purpose is simply the experience of being abroad itself, of witnessing a foreign world for the first time. However, at the very end of *Béton armé* the author seems to introduce a level of meaning to his journey that he has hitherto kept from the reader. He explains in detail the death of his best childhood friend, who, like him, suffered from a physical ailment (in his case, a club foot) ('nos corps estropiés avaient scellé une amitié qui devait durer toujours' (BA, 199)). Earlier in the text there have been hints that his disease might not be the only reason death seems to hang over the narrator to such an extreme extent: at one moment he tells us that he sees Shanghai 'comme à travers le regard d'un mort' (BA, 50); at another he claims that all humans are full of the ghosts of their loved ones 'qui continuent à mourir en nous' (BA, 24). Yet only at the end does it become clear that it is this ghost in particular that has been haunting the narrator throughout his life. This journey to Shanghai, this breaking out of the sheltered life of which his friend was deprived, is the brush with death the narrator needs in order to be able to come to terms with the death of the other. In placing himself in more danger than he has ever experienced before, Shanghai has been a sort of journey to the Underworld for Rahmy. Sébastien Rongier goes so far as to suggest that 'la géographie qui structure la narration de *Béton armé* mériterait une lecture parallèle de [*l'Énéide* de] Virgile'³⁸, and one can also trace in it a resemblance to the myth of Orpheus. Yet, unlike Orpheus, this poet goes to the Underworld not to claim back his loved one, but to finally lay them to rest: in an invocation to his friend, Rahmy tells him 'je te rends ta liberté' (BA, 203). This is not only an emancipation for the friend, whose metaphorical ashes Rahmy is finally able to sprinkle over Shanghai before returning home, but also a moment of supreme self-liberation. It tells of the narrator's making peace with mortality on a larger scale, of accepting both death and life and making the decision to embrace life with all his might, in spite of his illness. The journey, by enhancing his awareness of the world around him, has intensified his desire to live life to the fullest. The final sentence of *Béton armé*, 'Je rentre chez moi parmi les vivants' (BA, 203), illustrates this perfectly. Whereas before the overall impression we have been given of this narrator is one of unsettledness, rootlessness and denial that he belongs to humanity, this affirmation of a 'chez moi' is the sign of a new sense of acceptance and belonging that the journey to Shanghai has enabled.

In *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability and Life Writing*, Thomas Couser writes, 'if illness and disability are reminders of our mortality and frailty, narratives of those conditions are testaments to our resilience and vitality'³⁹. This is an accurate analysis of Rahmy's approach in writing *Béton armé*, and of his relationship to literature as a whole. It is a story of a marvellous and terrifying adventure, of a liberating act of courage that surpasses physical boundaries and brings the subject into the thick of life

³⁸ Rongier, 15th September 2013

³⁹ Couser, 296

through a full frontal collision with the perilous unknown. *Béton armé* is, in this sense, the story both of a departure and of a homecoming, where perils and remedies intermingle as the narrator shrugs off the shackles of disease and abandons himself, for the first time, to humanity.