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Alessandro Baricco: A Modern Homer

Whitney Losapio
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Preface

Alessandro Baricco, born in Turin in 1958, began his career as a philosopher, piano player and musicological critic. His first publication, *Il Genio in Fuga* (1988), is a critical essay on the work of Gioachino Rossini and *L'anima di Hegel e le mucche del Wisconsin* (1992) explores the relationship between music and modernity. Baricco was also employed in the world of journalism as a musical critic for *La Repubblica*, as a columnist for *La Stampa* and in the world of television as a talk show host on *Rai Tre* before entering the world of literature. His first novel, *Castelli di Rabbia* (in English, *Lands of Glass*) was published in 1991. He enjoyed great success in the following years, topping Italian and French bestseller lists with the novels *Oceano Mare* (1993) and *Seta* (1996). Around this time he also co-founded Scuola Holden, a creative writing school in Turin named after J.D. Salinger's character Holden Caulfield from *Catcher in the Rye*. In addition, Baricco's career expanded into the fields of film and theater. His theatrical monologue, *Novecento* (1993) became a film under the supervision of famed director Giuseppe Tornatore. Baricco has also read and performed parts of *Omero, Iliade*, his creative rewriting of Homer's classic, the Iliad, in prose, on stages across Italy. Baricco has continued to write novels, collections of short writings and essays, and has pursued other opportunities on stage and in the film and music industries. He has won the Prix Médicis Étranger in France and the Selezione Campiello, Viareggio and Palazzo al Bosco prizes in Italy. His talent spans many mediums, winning praise and recognition from around the world.¹

¹ For biographical and bibliographical information about Alessandro Baricco, consult: <www.oceanomare.com/bibliografia.htm>.

Introduction

Il successo di pubblico di Alessandro Baricco, dimostrato dalle copie vendute dei suoi romanzi e dal numero di edizioni e ristampe, è un fenomeno sotto gli occhi di tutti. Ma qual è la ragione di un tale successo?²

Critics generally agree that, “[t]here are reasons why Baricco is one of the few Italian contemporary authors who has been able to emerge from under the long shadows cast by Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco, and impose himself to the attention of both the reading public and literary scholars”.³ His success has been attributed to various facets of his unique writing style, his diverse body of work and his wide range of influences. However, Baricco’s popularity has also been linked in a negative way to a desire mass-produce his books in order to make a lot of money. In fact, Umberto Eco credits himself with the movement in Italy beginning in 1963 that promoted the “consenso = disvalore” equation.⁴ This attitude toward popular literature still exists in Italy today and has caused some critics to go as far as to deem Baricco’s work to be part of a juvenile literature movement, described thus: “Tuttavia, l’avvenimento letterario degli anni ’90 è indubbiamente l’arrivo massiccio di autori esordienti...che chiameremo «giovani narratori» in riferimento però più all’esperienza narrativa che all’età anagrafica”.⁵ This brand of *letteratura giovanile*, defined as literature written by youth for youth, with a young protagonist as a first person narrator, a setting in present day, and often addressing the themes of “musica, sesso, droga, solitudine, difficoltà relazioni con la famiglia”, sells well in the consumer culture of

² Bellavia, Elisa. "La Lingua Di Alessandro Baricco." *Otto/Novecento* 25.1 (2001): 135.

³ Ferme, Valerio. "Travel and Repetition in the Work of Alessandro Baricco: Reconfiguring the Real through the Myth of the 'Eternal' (?) Return." *Italian Culture* 18.1 (2000): 49.

⁴ Eco, Umberto. *Postille a Il Nome Della Rosa*. Milano: Bompiani 1984.

⁵ Contarini, Silvia. "Corrente e Controcorrente." *Narrativa* 12 (1997): 27.

modern day.⁶ Therein lies the criticism: a “juvenile book” is “[u]n «libro basso»...moderno, leggibile, e pure divertente perché abbassamento significa sguardo ludico, parodico, leggero” and is written merely to sell and make lots of money, with no regard to the things that constitute good writing and true literature.⁷

Baricco, come la maggior parte dei giovani narratori di cui si è parlato, propone ciò che piace, che non disturba, che è già intergrato alla cultura...Non c'è violenza contro la norma, non c'è dissenso. C'è futilità, effimero, sincretismo, superficialità, conformismo, adeguamento...Il problema dei giovani narratori e di Baricco è proprio questo: la loro letteratura, fatta per «restituire tutto», per «contenere il mondo», non serve a conoscerlo.⁸

Another critic agrees that a characteristic of Baricco's work is, “l'aderenza al linguaggio colloquiale, ossia l'italiano parlato nelle conversazioni quotidiane”.⁹ Baricco's use of informal, colloquial language can be seen as an attempt to recreate the world of the common day and to create realistic characters. However, in this case, critics believe it is an unsophisticated use of language that creates a low form of literature.

However, this criticism does not seem appropriate. While some of Baricco's protagonists are children¹⁰, his works do not seem to be geared toward a young audience. The themes of Baricco's novels are not those of struggling youth in today's world, described above. The struggles of his characters are often unrealistic and almost mythical or otherworldly, rather than a true hard-knock life story. In addition, Baricco's use of colloquial language does not make his works “*bassi*”, but rather helps to help define the personalities and backgrounds of some of his characters. For example, “in *Oceano Mare* è Ann Devarià [che] non rispetta...i dettami della grammatica italiana”, such as her use of the indicative form of a verb where the subjunctive form

⁶ Ibid, 30.

⁷ Ibid, 36.

⁸ Ibid, 45-46.

⁹ Bellavia, Elisa. "La Lingua Di Alessandro Baricco." *Otto/Novecento* 25.1 (2001): 137.

¹⁰ Baricco, Alessandro *Castelli di Rabbia*. Milano: Rizzoli 1991; *Oceano Mare*. Milano: BUR La Scala 1993; *City*. Milano: Rizzoli 1999.

is grammatically correct, a common colloquialism.¹¹ Baricco's critical and scholarly interests in literature and music make it unlikely that he would write something that lacked depth and culture. In addition, his writing is replete with complex literary and rhetorical devices, for example:

...diversi stili e generi letterari, figure retoriche, registri linguistici; si passa dal dialogo allo stile libero indiretto, dal monologo interiore al racconto, dal saggio alla descrizione, all'epistola, alla cronaca, alla massima morale, alla poesia, al frammento. La lingua alterna lirismi, conversazioni, prose raffinate forme parlate talvolta anche volgari. [C'è] la ripresa di un tema in formato ridotto o in metafora, ma spiccano l'uso di ossimori, le allitterazioni, i superlativi, il climax, il simbolismo, una punteggiatura elaborata e diversificata...¹²

This kind of mastery of language shows clearly that Baricco is not abasing literature or writing works that are overly simplistic. Baricco is neither a *narratore giovanile* in his actual age (he is presently 51 years old), nor is the quality or complexity of his work juvenile.

While Baricco's novels are not a part of the *letteratura giovanile* movement of the 1990s, it is more accurate to say that he was influenced by the post-modernist literature, dominant in Italy in the 1980s. Postmodern literature is described by Eco in his postscript to Il Nome Della Rosa as something that, "...richiede, per essere compreso, non la negazione del già detto, ma il suo ripensamento ironico".¹³ It is an attempt to use an established plot, such as those in the epic tales of Homer, and retell the story with an ironic twist. Often postmodernist literature is created, "nell'ideologia della narrazione la realtà non esiste, esiste la narrazione...e si profila l'antitesi tra narratore e romanziere: il romanziere analizza, scompone, divide; il narratore fa prevalere l'immagine sull'idea".¹⁴ For example, Baricco's novels attempt to avoid the label "novel" and remain simply stories, putting an emphasis, then, on the narrator and the fact that a

¹¹ Bellavia, Elisa. "La Lingua Di Alessandro Baricco." Otto/Novecento 25.1 (2001): 138.

¹² Contarini, Silvia. "Corrente e Controcorrente." Narrativa 12 (1997): 42.

¹³ Eco, Umberto. Postille a Il Nome Della Rosa. Milano: Bompiani 1984.

¹⁴ Contarini, Silvia. "Corrente e Controcorrente." Narrativa 12 (1997): 40.

story must be told. *Castelli di Rabbia* is described as a “pullulare di storie” and *Seta* “non è un romanzo. E neppure un racconto... è una storia”.¹⁵ Within his works Baricco also emphasizes the importance of the narrator, or teller of the story. In particular, in *Oceano Mare*, the narrator himself is a character that witnessed the story that unfolds firsthand.¹⁶

Another major characteristic of postmodernist literature is that, while it is, “material che esibisce delle proprie leggi naturali,” it also “porta con sé il ricordo della cultura di cui è carica (l’eco dell’intertestualità)”.¹⁷ True to postmodernist form, Baricco also uses both traditional and experimental formats and his novels are often characterized by intertextuality, that is, “i testi rinviano continuamente ad altri testi, si intersecano e compongono in sistemi di scatole cinesi; paratesto, ipertesto e metatesto partecipano a una composizione letteraria...”.¹⁸ The same critic that categorizes Baricco as a *narratore giovanile* calls his use of intertextuality a “joke” and a “spectacle”, essentially childish play.¹⁹ However, this is not the case. Baricco’s appreciation for his influences and use of names, images and styles taken from admired authors and employed in his own work as symbols and allusions shows literary competency and maturity and a distinctly postmodernist style.

Baricco’s influences are vast and he employs the ideas of others, often with the addition of his own twist, on many levels in his work. Baricco often uses an intertwining “web” of stories, “in itself a common literary practice (Gadda’s infinite “maglia”, the labyrinth of Calvino or Eco), but in Baricco it is induced by a determined manifestation of time: the virtual “infinity”

¹⁵ Baricco, Alessandro. *Castelli di Rabbia*. Milano: Rizzoli 1991; *Seta*. Milano: BUR La Scala 1996.

¹⁶ Baricco, Alessandro. *Novecento*. Milano: Feltrini 1994; *Oceano Mare*. Milano: BUR La Scala 1993.

¹⁷ Eco, Umberto. *Postille a Il Nome Della Rosa*. Milano: Bompiani 1984.

¹⁸ Contarini, Silvia. "Corrente e Controcorrente." *Narrativa* 12 (1997): 41.

¹⁹ Ibid.

of the narration makes his narrative quite extra-ordinary”.²⁰ Thus, Baricco is clearly influenced by the style of many postmodernist writers, but implements ideas such as “the web” in a way that is distinctly his own. The themes of the purity of the artist and the inadequacy of verbal language in the artist’s expression are extremely similar to themes found in Nietzsche, Pirandello and Michelstaeder.²¹ *Oceano Mare* pays tribute to Baricco’s influences Melville and Conrad: Bartleboom the professor shares characteristics in common with Melville’s Bartleby the scrivener, the imagery of the storm and being at sea in the second chapter of *Oceano Mare* reflects similar imagery in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, the Almayer Inn is named after the protagonist in Conrad’s *Almayer’s Folly: A Story of an Eastern River*, and Adams return from seeing the brutality of desperate men lost at sea reflects Marlow’s glimpse into the brutality of colonialism on the Congo River in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.²²

However, literary critics have yet to acknowledge one of Baricco’s strongest and most important influences: Homer, the ancient Greek bard from the sixth century BCE²³ and author of the epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In fact, the only connection made to date is the brief observation that Hélène, Hervé Joncour’s wife in Baricco’s *Seta* and Penelope, Odysseus’s wife in the *Odyssey* play a similar role of the faithful wife left at home while the husband journey’s abroad.²⁴ Taking Baricco’s work in a Homeric context can aid in viewing it in a scholarly context, rather than dismissing it as a simplistic story meant only for children, as some critics

²⁰ Lanslots, Inge. "Alessandro Baricco's Infinite Tales." *Spunti e Ricerche: Rivista d'Italianistica* 14 (1999): 55.

²¹ Bini, Daniela. "La Voce Del Mare: Da *Oceano Mare* Di Baricco a *La Leggenda Del Pianista Sull'Oceano* Di Tornatore." *Italica* 79.1 (2002): 44-61.

²² Fattori, Ivana Van Lieshout. "Personaggi Simbolo in *Oceano Mare* Di Alessandro Baricco." *'...E c'è Di Mezzo Il Mare': Lingua, Letteratura e Civiltà Marina, II*. Ed. Bart Van den Bossche, Michel Bastiaensen, and Corinna Salvadori Lonergan. Florence, Italy: Cesati, 2002. 467-472.

Lazzarin, Stefano. "Bartleby, Barnabooth, Bartlebooth, Bartleboom: Baricco e Il Grande Oceano Delle Storie." *Narrativa* 16 (1999): 143-65.

²³ Foley, John. "Reading' Homer through Oral Tradition." *College Literature* 34.2 (2007): 4.

²⁴ Senardi, Fulvio. "Alessandro Baricco, Ovvero...Che Storia Mi Racconti?" *Problemi: Periodico Quadrimestrale di Cultura* 112 (1998): 295.

assert. This paper will argue that Baricco's work is Homeric and, in fact, Baricco's implementation of many of Homer's devices, such as his understanding of his audience and use of rhythmic language and stereotyped story patterns, has aided Baricco's great success and popularity. Baricco's use of Homeric literary devices in a modern way has made his work extremely accessible to his audience.

A Modern Homer

...credo che ricevere un testo [come l'*Iliade*], che viene da così lontano, significhi sopra ogni cosa cantarlo con la musica che è nostra.²⁵

Before proceeding, it would be useful to understand that this paper will refer to Homer as if he were one man, with the understanding that there was not a single person nor multiple contributors behind the existing texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but rather a long line of performers existing from the conception of the epics in the sixth century BCE to the first complete written versions in the tenth century CE that passed the stories on orally.²⁶ Thus “Homer” does not refer to a “flesh-and-blood individual...because he simply never existed as such,” but rather, “«Homer» names the epic tradition as an ongoing whole”.²⁷

The most clear and obvious connection between Baricco and Homer is Baricco’s attempt to actually be a modern Homer in his recreation of Homer’s *Iliad* in his novel, *Omero, Iliade*. His novel describes the Trojan War through the first person accounts of twenty-one different Homeric characters, eliminating the role of the narrator, Homer himself, in an attempt to create for Baricco his own, modern Homeric narrative persona. In his preface to the text, Baricco reveals his admiration for the poet and the epic itself and his desire to make the ancient epic accessible to modern audiences. Before he even began writing the text, he considered simply performing the *Iliad* aloud, as Homer would have done, and was granted the opportunity to do so by the Romaeuropa Festival, the Torino Settembre Musica and Musica per Roma.²⁸

²⁵ Baricco, Alessandro. *Omero, Iliade* (2004). Milan: Feltrinelli 2008, 9 (preface).

²⁶ Foley, John. "Reading' Homer through Oral Tradition." *College Literature* 34.2 (2007): 4.

²⁷ Ibid, 7.

²⁸ Baricco, Alessandro. *Omero, Iliade* (2004). Milan: Feltrinelli 2008, 7.

His first ideas on the project were these: “Tempo fa ho pensato che sarebbe stato bello leggere in pubblico, per ore, tutta l’*Iliade*...[ma] mi subito parso chiaro che, in realtà, così com’era, il testo era illeggibile: ci sarebbero volute una quarantina di ore e un pubblico davvero molto paziente”.²⁹ Thus Baricco decided to shorten and refashion the text in a way that would preserve the plot and major themes, but would make the epic easily appreciated by a modern audience. In addition to removing certain scenes to suit the patience of a modern audience, Baricco also,

h[a] tagliato tutte le apparizioni degli dei...Sono forse le parti più estranee alla sensibilità moderna, e sovente spezzano la narrazione, disperdendo una velocità che, invece, avrebbe dell’eccezionale...Se quindi si tolgono gli dei da quel testo, quel che resto non è tanto un mondo orfano e inspiegabile, quanto un’umanissima storia in cui gli uomini vivono il proprio destino come potrebbero leggere un linguaggio cifrato di cui conoscono, quasi integralmente, il codice. In definitiva: togliere gli dei dall’*Iliade* non è probabilmente un buon sistema per comprendere la civiltà omerica: ma mi sembra un ottimo sistema per recuperare quella storia riportandola nell’orbita delle narrazioni a noi contemporanee.³⁰

As Baricco describes, the removal of the ancient Greek gods and goddesses, whom contemporary people can relate very little to, makes the story more modern. In addition the absence of these archaic figures changes the plotline very little, but rather enhances the drive behind it, making it more suited to a less patient audience.

Baricco also changes some other aspects of Homer’s *Iliad* to make this version of the epic poem distinctly his own. He made careful alterations in Homer’s style of writing, replacing archaic language with more modern, and thus more easily understandable, terms from “un italiano vivo”.³¹ His goal was to, “eliminare tutti gli spigoli arcaici che allontanano dal cuore

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 8.

delle cose”.³² Homer’s *Iliad*, which begins with Achilles rage against Agamemnon, finishes in Book XXIV with the end of the cycle of Achilles wrath and the return of Hektor’s body to Priam. Baricco thought another thing that would make *Omero, Iliade* more pleasing to a modern audience would be to add closure to the story of the Trojan War, rather than with the closure provided by Homer on Achilles’s rage. Baricco borrows a scene from Homer’s *Odyssey* where the bard, Demodocus, recounts the fall of Troy in order to provide this closure. Baricco suits his version of the epic to his audience, just as Homer’s *Iliad* was suited to his own. According to Eco, it is typical for a writer to suit his work to his audience:

C’è un scrittore che scrive solo per i posteri? No, neppure se lo afferma, perché, siccome non è Nortradamus, non può che configurarsi i posteri sul modello di ciò che sa dei contemporanei...[Crea] il testo...che cerca di andare incontro ai desideri dei lettori tali quali li si trova già per la strada...³³

Baricco does just this in his refashioning of Homer’s *Iliad* and it is also apparent in his other works that, “Baricco is interested most of all in upholding the rights of the reader. It is for the reader that literature exists, non as a[n]...author-centered enterprise”.³⁴ In the case of *Omero, Iliade*, it is clear that Baricco took on Homer’s role and successfully marketed an ancient epic both in live readings in 2004 to modern audiences of over ten thousand and in his text version, translated into many languages and available all around the world.³⁵

³² Ibid.

³³ Eco, Umberto. Postille a Il Nome Della Rosa. Milano: Bompiani 1984.

³⁴ Tarantino, Elisabetta. "Sailing Off on the Adel: Alessandro Baricco's Metaliterary Trilogy (Part 2)." Romance Studies 25.4 (2007): 325.

³⁵ Baricco, Alessandro. Omero, Iliade (2004). Milan: Feltrinelli 2008, 10.

Musicology and Oral Tradition

For with all peoples upon the earth singers are entitled
to be cherished and to their share of respect, since the Muse has taught them
her own way, and since she loves all the company of singers.³⁶

It is crucial to understand that Homer belongs to a long-standing oral tradition. “In two famous articles published in 1930 and 1932, [Milman Parry] made the case for Homeric diction as the product of composition in performance, of a long tradition of oral bards who must have sung (not written) ancient Greek epics”.³⁷ Because Baricco is a musician and musicologist and Homer a singer, their works contain strong lyrical and musical elements. In fact, Baricco’s performance of his own version of Homer’s *Iliad* makes Baricco a “singer” of epic tales himself. Through Parry’s research on oral tradition, it has been discovered that Homer used the repetition of certain formulas in order to make story telling easier for him and certain parts of the story more recognizable to the audience. He did this on three different levels within the epics: “metrically defined parts of lines...«typical scenes» and «story patterns»”.³⁸

First, while singing an epic tale, Homer used certain combinations of words, such as “And then spoke to him/her” combined with epithet names like “long-suffering divine Odysseus”, “swift-footed Achilles” or “goddess grey-eyed Athena” in order to make his lines fit seamlessly into the dactylic hexameter rhythm of the line (See fig. 1).³⁹ Another reason Homer uses these noun-epithets, even when they seem out of place (for example, “Achilles is called «swift-footed» when running, standing or lying down”) is that he is “naming a character by citing a single memorable quality, a tell-tale detail, that refers not to that character’s immediate

³⁶ Homer. *The Odyssey of Homer*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. New York: Harper Perennial 2007, 8.479-81)

³⁷ Foley, John. "Reading' Homer through Oral Tradition." *College Literature* 34.2 (2007): 3.

³⁸ Ibid, 13.

³⁹ Ibid, 10.

situational identity at any particular point in the story but to his or her larger identity across the epic” in order to give a brief reminder to the audience of who that character is and what his or her main qualities are.⁴⁰

Another level of the epic that Homer uses repetition and rhythmical patterns is setting a scene. Every Feast scene must include “a host and guest(s), the seating of the guests(s), several core actions associated with feasting, the satisfaction of the guest(s), and some kind of consequent mediation of a pre-existing problem”.⁴¹ Interestingly, Homer repeats verbatim the exact five-line description of the feast six times in the *Odyssey*.⁴² While the Feast is a stereotyped scene in the *Odyssey*, the Lament is a stereotyped scene in the *Iliad*. The Lament occurs when a woman mourns the death of a fallen hero and occurs four times in the *Iliad*, always in a three-part pattern.⁴³ Finally, the largest scale on which Homer repeats himself using an established and recognizable structure is in the story-pattern. For Homer, it is the Return structure that underlies the major plotline of the *Odyssey* and the minor plotline of Agamemnon-Clytaemnestra in the *Iliad*. Additionally, a third partially recovered epic from Homer entitled *Nostoi* (Returns) completes the “now-lost Epic Cycle about the Trojan War and its aftermath” and makes it clear that the Return story-pattern was a major component in all of Homer’s work.⁴⁴ Homer uses these typical scenes and story patterns, “not merely [as] a structural blueprint for constructing epic narrative, but an opportunity to situate individualized events and moments

⁴⁰ Ibid, 14-15.

⁴¹ Ibid, 11.

⁴² “A maidservant brought water for them and poured it from a splendid and golden pitcher, holding it above a water basin for them to wash, and she pulled a polished table before them. A grave housekeeper brought in the bread and served it to them, Adding many good things to it, generous with her provisions” (Ibid, 11)

⁴³ Ibid, 11.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 12-13.

within a traditionally reverberative frame”.⁴⁵ That is, Homer used familiar and even stereotyped scenes and story-patterns so that the audience could begin listening at any time immediately recognize the flow and rhythm of the scene or story.

While Baricco is not an ancient Greek bard, his novels use repetition to achieve a similar musicality and rhythm to that found in Homer’s works. In addition, both authors use this technique to make the reading or performance of their literature accessible to their audience. In fact, religious anthropologist Mircea Eliade has noted that in stories and mythology of archaic societies, “...repetition and cyclical patterns are the means by which many societies attempted to construct and give meaning to their world”.⁴⁶ Thus repetition is an established practice that has been noted in many cultures as a technique to help audiences make connections between the story and the world around them in a way that helps them better understand and in a way enriches the story as well as their daily lives.

In Baricco’s early non-fictional work, his two essays on musicology, he verbalizes the necessity of repetition in music, mirroring Eliade’s explanation for repetition in both oral storytelling and written literature. In *L’anima di Hegel e le mucche del Wisconsin*, Baricco reveals that he, “abhors the chaos and disorder of a work of art in which there exist no recognizable formal and thematic elements to guide the audience’s reception”.⁴⁷ Thus there is nothing familiar that the audience can connect to or use as a recognizable launching point from which to enjoy the piece of music. In the essay, Baricco praises “...Puccini’s incorporation of popular tunes in his operas...as a positive innovation, bordering sometimes on kitsch, but necessary to

⁴⁵ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁶ Ferme, Valerio. “Travel and Repetition in the Work of Alessandro Baricco: Reconfiguring the Real through the Myth of the ‘Eternal’ (?) Return.” *Italian Culture* 18.1 (2000): 50.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 54.

revitalize music's connection to the real world".⁴⁸ Puccini's use of well-known themes in his music as a way to connect to his audience and build a work of art using an established launching point is just like Homer's incorporation of the repetitious and familiar Feast or Lament sequences. Repetition is necessary in music just as it is in story-telling: "Tones that provide meaning, and repetitions that bring the audience back to the original theme, are the symbolic equivalents of those myths that lead the audience beyond the denotative function of the story into a charged time outside of history that gives meaning to one's limited and chaotic everyday reality".⁴⁹

While Baricco makes clear the necessity of repetition in the works of others, he very clearly puts his theory into practice in his own works. This use of recurring and interwoven phrases, images and storylines gives Baricco's fictional work an extremely musical quality: "Che l'interesse per la musica sia presente anche nell'opera narrativa di Baricco è evidente nella ricerca di un ritmo, nella scelta precisa dei suoni, nel frequente slittamento della prosa in poesia".⁵⁰ Like Homer, he sometimes repeats single words that are image evoking. For example, "In *Oceano Mare* for example the title itself pauses, defers the episodes in an almost obsessive way, imitating in its turn the waves of the sea...This narrative technique is used parallel to the undulation of what is narrated, meaning the journeys, the departures and returns, in the four volumes."⁵¹ Repetition of words and of entire scenes is also evident in Baricco's other fictional works:

⁴⁸ Ibid, 55.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 55-56.

⁵⁰ Bini, Daniela. "La Voce Del Mare: Da *Oceano Mare* Di Baricco a *La Leggenda Del Pianista Sull'Oceano* Di Tornatore." *Italica* 79.1 (2002): 44.

⁵¹ Lanslots, Inge. "Alessandro Baricco's Infinite Tales." *Spunti e Ricerche: Rivista d'Italianistica* 14 (1999): 53.

...Baricco's narrative [is] postmodern in an eclectic way...his narrative is non-linear, that is complex, obeying musical principles. His repetitious way of writing, evident at various levels, is striking. First of all there is the repetition of sentences, fragments of texts which recur on several occasions, like the refrain in a song, like "oh yes" in *Novecento*... [S]ometimes the change is almost imperceptible, as in the description of the route to Japan in *Seta*...⁵²

In fact, Baricco's description of Hervé Joncour's journey to Japan remains almost completely unchanged throughout the novel, in much the same way that Homer's Feast sequences repeat the same exact set of five lines every time a Feast takes place in the *Odyssey*.⁵³ Baricco uses the same sequence, making small changes to the adjectives used to describe the border crossing, the name the locals use to call Lake Bajkal and the time in the port of Sabirk.⁵⁴

A similar repetition occurs in the second chapter of *Oceano Mare*, "Il ventre del mare" in Savigny's account of the horrors that occurred on the raft between the survivors of the *Alliance*. Over the course of ten pages he lists and describes one thing after another that he remembers from his terrifying experience. Baricco builds on "La prima cosa è il mio nome...", repeating it and expanding it each time in a rhythmic cycle of repetition that culminates in the final piece of Savigny's story and the introduction of his connection with Thomas: "La prima cosa è il mio nome, la seconda quegli occhi, la terza un pensiero, la quarta la notte che viene, la quinta quei corpi straziati, la sesta è fame, la settima orrore, l'ottava i fantasmi della follia, la nona è carne e la decima è un uomo che mi guarda e non mi uccide".⁵⁵ One critic says of this section, "[Baricco] si serve una tecnica retorica da cantata, basata sulla ripetizione, creando un'onda sonora che acquista vieppiù di forza ad ogni ripetizione".⁵⁶ Baricco is using repetition here to

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Baricco, Alessandro. *Seta*. Milano: BUR La Scala 1996. 22, 31, 50, 67.

⁵⁴ Ferme, Valerio. "Travel and Repetition in the Work of Alessandro Baricco: Reconfiguring the Real through the Myth of the 'Eternal' (?) Return." *Italian Culture* 18.1 (2000): 64.

⁵⁵ Baricco, Alessandro. *Oceano Mare*. Milano: BUR La Scala 1993, 110.

⁵⁶ Bini, Daniela. "La Voce Del Mare: Da *Oceano Mare* Di Baricco a *La Leggenda Del Pianista Sull'Oceano* Di

create a rhythmic “wave” that gathers momentum and strikes the reader with more force as each repetition accumulates more that is attached to it. Thus Baricco, like Homer, repeats single words, lines and even large portions of text throughout his works. The repetition functions in a similar way to situate the reader and establish connections to familiar scenes and phrases as each novel progresses. Like the wave gathering momentum, each image that is repeated carries more meaning each time it appears.

The likening of the rhythms found in both Homer’s and Baricco’s works to that of a wave is no coincidence; the ocean, its musical or rhythmic quality in particular, is a central theme in the works of both men. In fact, “Chi legge con attenzione i libri di Alessandro Baricco non può negare che il mare e la musica sono due tematiche care allo scrittore”.⁵⁷ In addition, scholars, critics and “[p]oets have always associated the poems maritime content [of the *Odyssey*] with the rolling effect of its broad-sweeping hexameter verse”.⁵⁸ Both Baricco and Homer are fascinated with capturing the sound and feeling of the ocean in the rhythm of their writing. For them, “[la] sussurrata dal mare illustra l’importanza del suono, del ritmo del mare; l’acqua si fa musica”.⁵⁹ The ocean’s musical qualities become in themselves music and in imitating the ocean both Homer and Baricco make music within their works.

Tornatore." *Italica* 79.1 (2002): 48.

⁵⁷ Van den Bogaert, Annelies. "Alessandro Baricco: Fra Novecento e Il Mare c'è Di Mezzo La Musica." *'...E c'è Di Mezzo Il Mare': Lingua, Letteratura e Civiltà Marina, II*. Ed. Bart Van den Bossche, Michel Bastiaensen, and Corinna Salvadori Lonergan. Florence, Italy: Cesati, 2002. 451.

⁵⁸ Hall, Edith. *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2008, 14.

⁵⁹ Van den Bogaert, Annelies. "Alessandro Baricco: Fra Novecento e Il Mare c'è Di Mezzo La Musica." *'...E c'è Di Mezzo Il Mare': Lingua, Letteratura e Civiltà Marina, II*. Ed. Bart Van den Bossche, Michel Bastiaensen, and Corinna Salvadori Lonergan. Florence, Italy: Cesati, 2002. 458.

The Return Story-Pattern

When the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, or through the grace of some male or female, human or animal, personification, the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy.⁶⁰

While Baricco utilizes story-telling tools from ancient times, his work is also informed by a cultural and historical understanding of his present day audience and of modernity. The Western world was guided for centuries by the ideas of, “Linearism and the progressivistic approach to the History of the world that was brought about by Illuminism and seventeenth-century thought”.⁶¹ The idea that history was only moving in one positive direction affected science, philosophy, literature and all other modes of thought and expression up until the fall of progressivism in the early 20th century. “[T]hrough the horror of the two World Wars”, it was difficult for people to believe that the brutality of the violence and the large death toll were a positive step for Europe and humanity, and there was a philosophical and literary move to “revalue the ‘myth of cyclical periodicity [and] the myth of the eternal return’”.⁶² Thus, Baricco returns to a story-pattern that is ancient, but that speaks powerfully to a modern audience.

In the last section, Homer’s adherence to a Return story-pattern was discussed. Baricco too uses a similar pattern in many of his works and in general terms the two authors can be connected by their similar implementation of a story-pattern. However, instead of comparing the two authors directly, which has hardly been done, it would be useful to use the vessel of Joseph Campbell’s “monomyth” because scholars have already drawn comparisons between the “monomyth” and works from both Baricco and Homer. In particular, it would be useful to

⁶⁰ Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with a Thousand Faces. New York: Princeton University Press 1973.

⁶¹ Ferme, Valerio. “Travel and Repetition in the Work of Alessandro Baricco: Reconfiguring the Real through the Myth of the ‘Eternal’ (?) Return.” Italian Culture 18.1 (2000): 51.

⁶² Ibid.

compare Homer's *Odyssey* and Baricco's *Oceano Mare* to Joseph Campbell's work because they best demonstrate this Return structure. First it would be helpful to understand Joseph Campbell's theory of the "monomyth". The "monomyth" is the structure that Campbell believes lies at the center of most other myths, to discuss the similarities in structure. Campbell defines the "monomyth" in terms of a "hero" who "ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are encountered there and a decisive victory is won".⁶³

This story-pattern is evident in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus leaves the shores of Troy for the strange waters and lands of the Aegean, meeting mythical beasts and alluring goddesses, and achieving victory upon his escape from the captivity of Calypso and his return home. The Almayer Inn in *Oceano Mare* represents a supernatural place in which all of the characters venture forth into. It is a liminal place, as Elisewin explains to Padre Pluche: "Questa è la riva del mare, Padre Pluche. Né terra né mare. È un luogo che non esiste".⁶⁴ It is described within the text paradoxically as dangerous, yet peaceful.⁶⁵ The decisive victory is won in *Oceano Mare* not by one particular hero, but by most of characters: "the survivors from the Inn...will, in different ways end up by being saved or at least by being at peace with the world".⁶⁶

Campbell gets more specific in his definition of the "monomyth", however, saying that a hero must go through a cyclical journey of separation, initiation and return, with more complex steps between these three major phases.⁶⁷ Odysseus's journey is also structured in the same way.

⁶³ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Princeton University Press 1973, p. 30.

⁶⁴ Baricco, Alessandro. *Oceano Mare*. Milano: BUR La Scala 1993, 92.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 153.

⁶⁶ Tarantino, Elisabetta. "Sailing Off on the Adel: Alessandro Baricco's Metaliterary Trilogy (Part 2)." *Romance Studies* 25.4 (2007): 323-37.

⁶⁷ See Appendix, Fig. 2.

He is first separated from home when he leaves Ithaca to fight in the Trojan War, however this does not actually take place in the *Odyssey*. Victorious after his wooden horse scheme, Odysseus then departs from the safety of the shores of Troy and, having angered Poseidon, is blown completely off course and into unknown lands by a storm.⁶⁸ This is his “call to adventure”.⁶⁹ Odysseus is initiated to the journey ahead of him, filled with many trials, when he first meets the Lotus Eaters, who want him to stay in their land, “feeding on lotus, and forget the way home”.⁷⁰ Campbell describes the “initiation” step as a “form of self-annihilation”⁷¹, which is what happens to Odysseus. Here he is launched into a world of strange fantasy with the potent, magical lotus fruits and has encountered his first obstacle on his way back to Ithaca, foreshadowing the ten-year struggle in which he will encounter nothing but obstacles.

He is also offered the divine help of Athena, and though she does not give him physical amulets for protection, she gives him divine protection and care when she is able.⁷² Odysseus and his men encounter many obstacles and all of Odysseus’s men are lost to the perils of the journey, but he is still able to return home to Ithaca in the end as both a healthy and wealthy man and reclaim his wife and his throne. Campbell also says that at the point of the hero’s return, “the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on the fellow man”.⁷³ Though Odysseus brings the tangible gift of a ship full of expensive gifts to Ithaca from the Phaiakians, it is not wealth that will end the turmoil in Ithaca.⁷⁴ It is only Odysseus that can claim the power that is rightfully his as king, rid his home of the parasitic suitors, return to his

⁶⁸ Homer. *The Odyssey of Homer*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. New York: Harper Perennial 2007, p. 139.

⁶⁹ See Appendix, Fig. 2.

⁷⁰ Homer. *The Odyssey of Homer*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. New York: Harper Perennial 2007, p. 139.

⁷¹ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Princeton University Press 1973, p. 91.

⁷² See Appendix, Fig.2: “Helpers” as a step in Campbell’s monomyth theory.

⁷³ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Princeton University Press 1973, p. 30.

⁷⁴ Homer. *The Odyssey of Homer*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. New York: Harper Perennial 2007, p. 198.

wife and bring order and prosperity back to Ithaca.⁷⁵ Thus, it is not necessarily a physical boon that is required, but instead the boon is the hero him/herself.

Oceano Mare follows this story-pattern in two ways: in the structure of the novel itself and in some of the story lines of the characters. Structurally, the novel begins with a departure from reality into the mythical realm of the Almayer Inn. The reader departs from a comfortable reality into this strange world in the *libro primo*, in which all of the characters are introduced and convene at the Almayer Inn in order to fix their wide array of problems. Then the reader is initiated in the *libro secondo*: “Il ventre del mare”, where the book ventures forth into the dangerous realm of the sea where the laws of the land have no bearing. In the *libro terzo*, “I canti del ritorno”, and obviously allusion by Baricco to the pattern of the story, the reader returns to the Almayer Inn and sees that the ocean, in addition to its horrific destructive properties from the *libro secondo*, also has boons to bestow upon the characters and helps them resolve their story lines. In a way, the sea is the protagonist in this sense.

However, the characters also experience the events similar to those delineated by Campbell’s “monomyth” theory and Elisewin is the character “who most directly enacts Campbell’s paradigm”.⁷⁶ She “suffers from a pathologically enhanced sensitivity which makes it impossible for her to participate in life” and she can only be cured by departing from her home in Carewell and going to the sea. At the Almayer Inn, she loses her innocence in a night of passion with Thomas and is initiated by an “annihilation” of her old self. Elisewin is cured and returns from the Almayer to a new home with Langlais, upon whom she can bestow the boons of the stories that she has learned from Thomas. Other characters also receive the seemingly divine and

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 253-359.

⁷⁶ Tarantino, Elisabetta. "Sailing Off on the Adel: Alessandro Baricco's Metaliterary Trilogy (Part 2)." Romance Studies 25.4 (2007): 325.

certainly supernatural aid from the four children who run the Almayer Inn: Dood, Ditz, Dol and Dira. Another critic notes that “in Baricco, the knowledge granted to the children is never accessible to the adults”,⁷⁷ and it is common that they are godlike figures that can control otherworldly facets of life and help the protagonists.

Using Campbell’s “monomyth” structure creates a strong connection between Homer’s and Baricco’s work and return journeys evident in each. While, above, the connection has been strongly drawn between Homer’s *Odyssey* and Baricco’s *Oceano Mare*, “[i]ndeed, it is possible to say that each and every one of Baricco’s fictional works – from *Castelli di Rabbia* to *Oceano Mare*, from the monologue *Novecento* to...*Seta*, and...*City* – revolves around cyclical motifs and the idea of the return...”.⁷⁸ The return structure in Baricco’s work demonstrates that his novels contain a universal structure and common themes that transcend centuries of time and gaps in culture.

⁷⁷ Perissinotto, Cristina. "In the Land of the Pueri Sapientes: Magical Caprices in Two Novels by Alessandro Baricco." *RLA: Romance Languages Annual* 10.1 (1998): 341-4.

⁷⁸ Ferme, Valerio. "Travel and Repetition in the Work of Alessandro Baricco: Reconfiguring the Real through the Myth of the 'Eternal' (?) Return." *Italian Culture* 18.1 (2000): 57.

Conclusion

...i libri parlano sempre di altri libri e ogni storia racconta una storia già raccontata. Lo sapeva Omero...⁷⁹

There is no doubt that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have maintained for millennia an “enormity...of cultural presence”⁸⁰ and that Baricco is one of millions inspired by Homer’s legacy. It is difficult even to measure the effect that Homer’s work has had on western culture and contemporary literature, “so deeply has it shaped our imagination and cultural values”.⁸¹ However, the influence upon Baricco’s work is clear; in his fictional works, Baricco has successfully implemented ancient story-patterns, themes and rhyme schemes that have been proven to delight audiences for centuries and have shown clearly by Baricco’s success to have also captured the imagination of his own readers.

His novels are Homeric in the most basic way, their “monomythic” story-pattern, but also have more specific Homeric elements like rhetorical devices, imagery or allusion. For example, Baricco’s description of “...il pittore Plason davanti al suo quadro bianco, metafora di nulla...”⁸² at the beginning of *Oceano Mare* conjures up the image of Homer invoking the Muse as he tries to create an epic from a “blank canvas”. Even some characters of Baricco are Homeric, for example, Mrs. Rail in *Castelli di Rabbia* and Hélène in *Seta* waiting patiently and faithfully at home for their philandering husbands are perfect images of the beautiful and admirable Penelope.⁸³ In fact, Anna Devaria of *Oceano Mare* is an unfaithful female protagonist of

⁷⁹ Eco, Umberto. *Postille a Il Nome Della Rosa*. Milano: Bompiani 1984.

⁸⁰ Hall, Edith. *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer’s Odyssey*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2008, 3.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Pezzin, Claudio. *Alessandro Baricco*. Sommacampagna: Cierre Edizioni 2001, 35.

⁸³ Baricco, Alessandro. *Castelli di Rabbia*. Milano: Rizzoli 1991; *Seta*. Milano: BUR La Scala 1996.

Baricco's and she and her lover are murdered violently, much like Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus.⁸⁴

However, in Eco's definition of postmodern literature, he says that, while a postmodern work is in large part a product of other, previously written works, it also maintains its own, unique irony.⁸⁵ The irony of Baricco lies in his tone; each work "[è] una narrativa teatrale che ha spesso i toni di un umorismo grottesco e paradossale..."⁸⁶ In addition, the extremely unique worlds in Baricco's works are characterized by "...una costante violazione del canone del reale...nel caos vitale dell'immaginazione, una condizione ideale e utopica che può essere vissuta solo nella consapevole accettazione dell'assurdità e dell'insignificanza..."⁸⁷ One critic sees this type of world as part of a unifying theme of "infinity"⁸⁸ throughout Baricco's work, "which stands for the unlimitedness of things and its impact on the characters who are subjected to peculiar conditions of space and time".⁸⁹ There is unlimited potential in the "infinite" worlds of imagination and the "absurdity" of it all "...implies that 'infinity' acquires no clearly specified meaning".⁹⁰ It is a bleak conclusion to come to after all of the creativity and invention it takes to create these imaginative worlds. This "infinite" quality is not often found in Italian literature and is likened more to the "baroque" effect found in Latin American narrative literature.⁹¹ Thus Baricco's work is characterized both by an extreme uniqueness as well as being influenced by one of the most imitated authors of all time. He is drawing upon the ancient and with the

⁸⁴ Baricco, Alessandro. Ocean Mare. Milano: BUR La Scala 1993.

⁸⁵ Eco, Umberto. Postille a Il Nome Della Rosa. Milano: Bompiani 1984.

⁸⁶ Pezzin, Claudio. Alessandro Baricco. Sommacampagna: Cierre Edizioni 2001, 7.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 8.

⁸⁸ Lanslots, Inge. "Alessandro Baricco's Infinite Tales." Spunti e Ricerche: Rivista d'Italianistica 14 (1999): 47.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 50.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 54.

⁹¹ Ibid, 47.

addition of a new perspective, he has created a truly postmodernist work according to Eco's definition.

Appendix

Fig. 1 (Foley, 10)

Here are some combinations of actions and epithet names that Homer commonly used to fit his lines into the parameters of the meter of the line along with how often they appear in the epics.

Multiple actions

But pondered (1 occurrence)
 But went through the house (1 occurrence)
 Again spoke (8 occurrences)
 Then sat there (1 occurrence)

Single noun-epithet name

+long-suffering divine Odysseus
 +long-suffering divine Odysseus
 +long-suffering divine Odysseus
 +long-suffering divine Odysseus

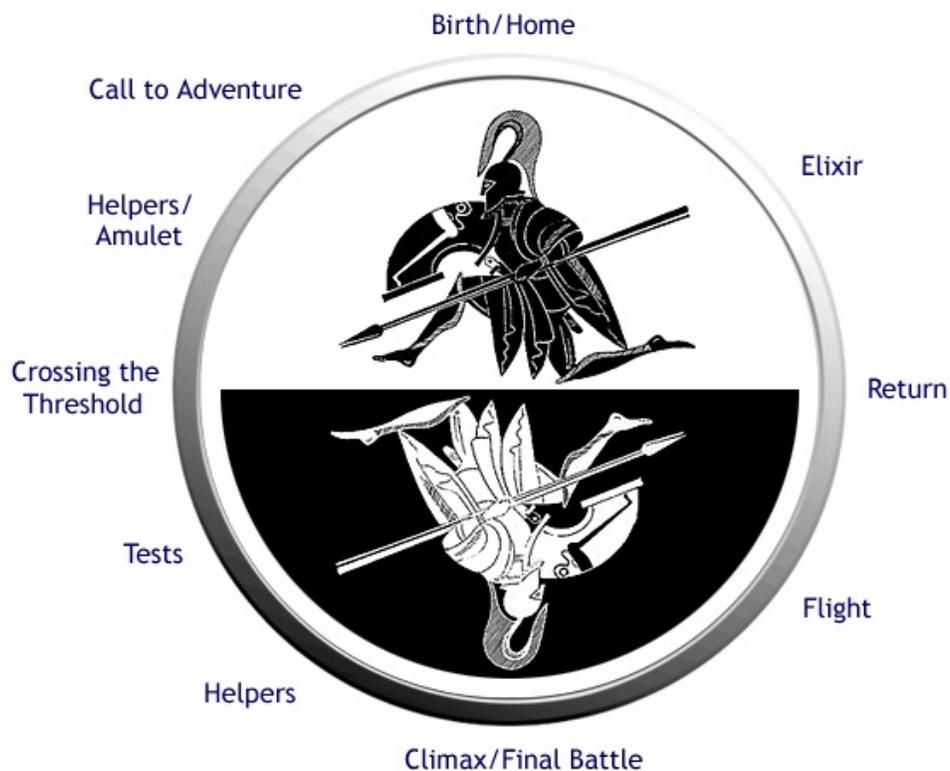
Single action

And then spoke to him/her
 And then spoke to him/her

Multiple noun-epithet names

+long-suffering divine Odysseus (3)
 +swift-footed Achilles (2)
 +ox-eyed mistress Hera (4)
 +Gerenian horseman Nestor (8)
 +goddess grey-eyed Athena (7)
 +Diomedes of the great war-cry (1)

Fig. 2 (Google)



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