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Kevin Petroni, *L'Adieu aux aspirations nationales: Crise des formes de vie dans la littérature corsophone*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020. 346 pp. Notes and index. €78.00 (hb). ISBN 9782406104445; €39.00 (pb). ISBN 9782406104438.

Review by David Evans, University of St Andrews.

This timely study of three contemporary novels from Corsica offers a pessimistic—some might argue, realistic—vision of Corsican identity in the early decades of the twenty-first century. The epigraph from Jérôme Ferrari's short story collection *Variétés de la mort* (2001) leaves little doubt as to the tone of what will follow: "Tout ce que je veux aujourd'hui, c'est...m'empêcher de m'inventer un nouveau sol natal, c'est m'arracher à toute étreinte possible pour achever, dans la sérénité et l'extase, la magnifique trajectoire de ma chute" (p. 7). Indeed, this monograph is, first and foremost, a study of loss, a requiem for an agro-pastoral island society eradicated by the seemingly irrepressible onwards march of modernity. Given the current interest in regional writing from France, [1] the tensions identified here will resonate with many researchers: what does it mean to construct one's sense of self in dialogue with an ancestral identity which is marginal to the narrative of the nation-state, and moreover, how does one do so in the dominant language of that nation-state? What other options are open to the Corsican writer who is faced with an unappealing choice between a traditional identity which increasingly seems fictional, out of step with contemporary reality, and a modern world in which the only role offered to such communities is that of tourist destination, timeless, static and thereby marketable as "authentic"?

The characters of the three novels studied here find themselves grappling with precisely this existential crisis, unable to negotiate a path through the tension between rootedness in the world of their ancestors and the rampant urbanisation, consumerism and mass tourism which the novels, and Petroni himself, critique. As he demonstrates through insightful close readings of *Le Sermon sur la Chute de Rome* (2012) by Jérôme Ferrari, *Murtoriu: ballade des innocents* (2012) by Marc Biancarelli, and *Nos Anges* (2014) by Jean-Baptiste Predali, many of the characters suffer an anxiety caused by their acute awareness of the need for change, and by their inability to identify precisely what form this transformation, or evolution, should take. In Petroni's analysis, this particular strand of the contemporary Corsican novel articulates "une esthétique du dépaysement," (p. 29) which brings about no less a catastrophe than "l'effondrement collectif de la société insulaire," akin to what Franz Fanon identified in *Les Damnés de la terre* as a collective suicide (p. 190). Indeed, Petroni argues: "C'est tout un monde qui s'est rigidifié sous l'effet de la disparition, c'est tout un monde qui s'est figé en attendant le jour où quelqu'un serait capable de lui redonner vie. Seulement, la culture de ce lieu a été égarée et nul n'est capable de poser le moindre mot sur la réalité de cette communauté" (p. 283). Being Corsican, for Petroni, no longer

signifies belonging to a united, identifiable community, but rather, to a society in movement, fragmented by individualism, a bitter reality which, in all three novels, drives characters to leave the island to make their home elsewhere.

After a short introduction to his *problématique* entitled “La Crise de la conscience insulaire,” Petroni explores how what he calls *la littérature corsophone* has emerged from the wreckage of the *Riacquistu*, the political and cultural movement which developed in the 1970s, and whose proponents sought a return to the *culture paysanne* which had been devalued and endangered by economic developments overseen since the 1950s by the French state. Various successes emerged from this renewal of cultural activity, such as the founding of the University of Corsica in 1981, and a concerted effort to standardise the Corsican language and increase speaker numbers. Yet the movement lost its way, disintegrating in the 1990s, and for Petroni and the authors studied here, its attempt to revive a lost identity ended up simply perpetuating a fiction which no longer matched the reality of life on the island, creating a sense of self-alienation from that myth of an originary community. Petroni argues that literary publishing on Corsica is a necessarily political affair—“le lien entre champ politique et champ littéraire est presque indissociable dans le cas insulaire”—but the challenge for writers now lies not in keeping that illusory past on life support, but rather, in identifying how to shape Corsican identity for the future (p. 68). While these novels explore “la vie de toute une génération privée d’identité et d’espoir” they offer no easy solution to this sense of loss of direction (p. 71). Petroni, disabused of romantic nostalgia, makes his position clear: the history of Corsica is best understood as a transnational one, and the island is a multilingual space. Thus *une littérature corsophone* is not a uniquely Corsican-language enterprise. The term instead encompasses, for Petroni, texts which grapple with a Corsican identity in constant evolution: “l’enjeu actuel est de former l’espace dans lequel l’identité corse est discutée et disputée par le littéraire” (p. 84).

The analysis of the novels is then divided into three sections which chart the characters’ gradual *prise de conscience* of the island’s identity crisis via their various displacements and attempts to find a sense of belonging. In the first phase, *un réenracinement en trompe l’œil*, what initially appears to be a *retour aux origines* leaves the characters feeling out of place and reveals only “l’illusion du sol natal” (p. 86). They might desire to implant themselves, through a return to the village and to the language and culture of their ancestors, but there is nothing for them to return to—the origin myth reveals itself to be a lie. In *Murtoriu*, Marc-Antoine Cianfarani attempts to reconnect with the spirit of the island by adopting the posture of the *écrivain montagnard*, a role which proves unsatisfactory in no small part thanks to the poor quality of his poetry. In *Le Sermon*, the students Libero and Matthieu, unable to integrate into the elitist world of the Parisian university, return to Corsica and open a bar. And in *Nos Anges*, a novel which recognizes “la défaite du combat national,” Augustin Bianchi and Jean Masseria join the nationalist movement to little positive effect (p. 153). In each case, initial enthusiasm for an active involvement in the destiny of the island cannot compete with the growing realisation “qu’un livre est en train de se fermer, qu’un monde est en train de devenir incompréhensible” (p. 176).

In the second section, *phase de déterritorialisation*, Petroni explores how the novels represent the crisis of the village, as what was once the heart of the island community becomes a ‘non-zone’ absorbed by “les villes tentaculaires” (p. 155) and disappears “sous la forme anonyme de la ville-monde” (p. 211). Consumer society is the enemy here, having freed the members of society from moral responsibility towards any social structure beyond the self, changing *paysans* into individuals, and destroying all notion of solidarity. Social spaces, such as the bar launched by

Libero and Matthieu, are most lucrative when they are transformed into *non-lieux* free from any kind of local specificity, further distancing islanders from their family and their community (p. 215). Petroni clearly agrees so strongly with the diagnosis presented in these novels that it is sometimes uncertain whether we are reading his own lament for Corsican identity or a literary analysis of the texts, and on occasion, he seems to identify the enemy everywhere, quick to locate the roots of the island's malaise in any manifestation of modernity, as when he ascribes the dissolution of the *tribu familiare* to the advent of television and home computers. What does emerge powerfully from this section, however, is the sense of degradation to which island life has submitted: the return to the village is impossible precisely because there is no longer a village to which to return.

Against this bleak backdrop, the third section of the monograph looks at the only option which still appears open to the subject wishing to engage with the question of Corsica: *écrire la fin d'un monde*. It is a state marked by departures and loss. In *Murtoriu*, Marc-Antoine chooses exile in Barcelona over life on the island, settling in a city free from the burden of his cultural memory, which for Petroni represents "le choix de renoncer à toute revendication identitaire" (p. 211). As Marc-Antoine comes to terms with his decision to leave, it strikes him that he had been searching for something which has been irrevocably lost: "Nous cherchions du sens, nous cherchions à être fidèle à quelque chose issu d'un si lointain passé mais la vérité c'est que ce sens, ce mystère d'un âge enfui, eh bien, nous n'en savons plus rien. Et peut-être n'y a-t-il définitivement plus rien à savoir" (p. 257).

The crisis of the subject as represented in this novel takes the form of "un adieu aux aspirations épiques" (p. 242), a "chant funèbre" for Corsican society (p. 261), the recognition of "la fin de la patrie" (p. 281). A similar sense of defeat characterises *Nos Anges*, in which the separatist cause is shown to be moribund, as an innocent man, Augustin Bianchi, is framed by the police because of his political and clandestine activities, and wrongly executed for the murder of a child. Yet if salvation is not to be found on the island, it is not achievable either through attempts to find belonging in the nation-state; in *Le Sermon*, despite his best efforts to participate somehow in global events, Marcel Antonetti is doomed to a sense of being outside world history, "une histoire à laquelle la Corse ne participe pas" (p. 290).

Petroni suggests at one point that these novels, when taken together, might function as a "récit édifiant ayant pour but de convertir le lecteur, de l'inciter à travers un message polémique à une refondation de la communauté corse" (p. 209). Throughout the bulk of his analysis, however, the reading which emerges is altogether less hopeful. Petroni identifies in these works "une philosophie de l'oubli" (p. 217), a recognition that Corsicans must face up to the truth that the world is not static, that it evolves and forgets, and he suggests that the overall message of *Le Sermon* might be interpreted as "un moyen de dire aux Corses: oubliez, c'est la seule manière de construire un autre monde" (p. 239). While the feelings of loss and anxiety experienced by the modern subject in a world accelerating too quickly are not exclusive to Corsica, Petroni successfully demonstrates that they are felt particularly acutely by those who remember, or still feel an attachment to, the rural community which has been obliterated, not only by the French nation-building project, but also by the forces of globalisation. As such, this powerful study of absence and rupture, of a crisis of cultural memory, makes an extremely fruitful contribution to contemporary debates around non-national literatures, both within France and further afield.

## NOTE

[1] See, for example, *Ecrire le pays natal: la littérature du proche en France*, ed. by Mannaig Thomas and Jean-Pierre Dupouy (Paris: Champion, 2021), *New Dialogues with Breton Literature and Culture*, ed. by David Evans and Heather Williams, *Nottingham French Studies*, 60:2 (July 2021) and Katharine Ellis, *French Musical Life: Local Dynamics in the Century to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022). Heather Williams's *Postcolonial Brittany: Literature Between Languages* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007) is a landmark in the field, with important work being carried out by Nelly Blanchard and Mannaig Thomas at the Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique (Université de Brest) and Valentina Gosetti's current project, 'Provincial Poets and the Making of a Nation' (University of New England, Australia). See also Gosetti's "Poetry Anthropologists as Translingual Mediators: The Example of Adolphe van Bever's *Les Poètes du terroir*," *L'Esprit Créateur* 59:4 (2019): 40-53 and her article with Antonio Viselli, "L'autoexotisme' des poètes provinciaux: une ruse dix-neuviémiste ? Le cas des *Amours jaunes* de Tristan Corbière," *Romantisme* 181:3 (2018): 47-61.

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