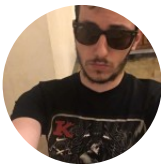




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Rivers: In the uncertain waters of Martin Michael Driessen



MARK DE LAURENTIS

September 25, 2020

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s everyone knows, water and meditation are married forever ”

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Herman Melville. *Moby Dick*, New York

Often it is the small books that take the reader away from the most satisfaction. And the hardest to review. This is the case of [Rivers](#) (Del Vecchio Editore, 2020, translated excellently by Stefano Musilli), by the Dutch writer Martin Michael Driessen, which I had recently included in [our advice for the summer](#). The 180 pages that make up this collection of short stories in fact require a wide concentration and reflection, as they are full of symbolism and a broad psychological construct of the characters.

To delve into the nuances of the book, however, it is necessary to frame the author. Driessen is a Dutch-speaking writer, born in Bloemendaal, Netherlands, but a German mother. his professional career unfolded first in Germany as a theatre and opera director, only to return to his homeland to begin his literary career. He currently lives in the Dutch countryside, in a classic *woonbooten* above a river (so much to stay on the subject with the book). His first literary work, *Gars*, in 1999, received excellent reviews and recognition, but the European consecration took place in 2012 with *Father of God*, published in Italy also by Del Vecchio. Driessen is considered mostly as a *writer's writer*, and at home his "location" on the literary scene is somewhat uncertain: some consider him as [the new voice of Dutch literature](#) and coined for him the term *"Mythical Realism"* (i.e. realism -

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Driessen's writing recalls a classic classic of theatrical dramas, his style is certainly traditional, but this feeling of classical epic is mixed with both lyrical and ironic nuances. That said, *Rivers* can be considered peacefully as a *summum* of all the topics previously covered by its author. We then analyze the various stories that make up the collection.



'Sir Bedivere casts the sword Excalibur into the Lake', 1911.

Man vs. No. Nature, New Year'

The three stories that make up the book are set at different historical moments between Holland, Northern France and Germany. All three stories have a river as a common denominator, which not only is the background to the plot but also orients the choices of the characters. These are essentially based on a delicate balance between two oxymorers: that between myth and modernity and that between Nature and Man.

An example of this is the first story, *Fleuve Sauvage*, the shortest of the collection, but also the most psychological. The protagonist is a failed theatre actor, grappling with the demons of alcoholism. The latter embarks on a canoe trip on the Aisne, in the Ardennes, in an attempt to stop drinking and rehabilitate his family. This trip is described as "a return to the origins [...] that's the meaning of life in nature." Here we immediately fry about the cruel nature of the river, which shows no chance of redemption. The key scene is that of a bottle of whiskey that the protagonist throws into the waters of the river, except to find it back in front shortly after, carried by the current. It is the first sign that nature is a dignitary of man's destiny, which seems unable to avail itself of so-called **free will**.

In this scene the omniscient narrator immediately evokes the myth: "... he felt like the knight who had thrown *Excalibur* into the water ... a gift from the gods of the river." For those who do not remember him, Arthur, mortally wounded, ordered Sir Bedivere to throw his sword into Lake Avalon, in front of the Lady of the Lake. A custom that derives in turn from the Celtic tradition, according to which a sword could be thrown into the lake as a votive gift to the deities or nymphs of water, as [Driessen](#) himself confirms: "the myth, or rather the formation of the myth, plays an absolute role in this story, even double, but subordinate to the psychological case study described in a realistic way". The author then points out that the

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No less important is the transfiguration of the protagonist with the Shakespearean tragedy: his ambition is to be able to act as an actor in the role of *Macbeth*, while in reality the part assigned to him by his theater company is that of Banquo. As he journeys down the river, his thoughts are turning more and more to the dramatic figure of the Scottish king, and this disconnect between reality and fantasy will generate an increasingly disturbing identity crisis, right down to the epilogue with dramatic and comic charm at the same time. The Dutch writer's ability is to create a story structured on several levels, without giving up his dry and minimalist style.



The Styx in Gustave Doré's Illustration of the Divine Comedy

Down to the river

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the supreme rule of the case." John Milton, Paradise Lost

In the next story, *The Journey to the Moon*, this plant is expanded even more. The story is an adventurous epic with two men from different social backgrounds at the center. Both are involved in timber flutation in southern Germany. Julius, son of the local impresario, is a high school student while the other, Konrad, is a young rafter who works a day. The two are friends but in many ways they are strangers to each other, they do not know each other at all. And as they grow, the scissors that divide their two personalities expand. Here the metaphor of the river plays on three levels: this river journey symbolizes the flow of history (European, from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the Third Reich), as a metaphor for the phases of human life (the raft journey that begins from the spring to reach the sea), and in the broadest sense as an allegory of the flow of life. Both Konrad and Julius have a strong desire to break free from their traditional world and emancipate themselves. During the story, however, while Julius will prove adept at following the logic of **modernization**, Konrad will never be able to make a paradigm shift from his background ("machines are not for you," Konrad's boss candidly states). The world around them is heading towards a new historical moment, *"the barbaric vanguard of the new era"* to quote the narrator, and it is the beginning of an era of violence (world wars) and

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“ *“After this war, the world will never return as it was,” said [Julius] a few minutes later.*

“Are you talking about steam tugs?” asked Konrad, not before he thought about it.

“Even of those,” Julius replied.

This feeling of “lost paradise”, together with the “corruption of spirits” is partly confirmed by the character of Evchen, a girl breeder of geese of which Konrad is in love, who moves away from the apparent quiet of the village and then finds her a few pages later in an infamous brothel. Here, however, there is an element that partly disproves this construct: Evchen is in fact tortured even earlier by the villagers (“*Konrad infers that all the men of the country had possessed it*”). Therefore, even in the illusory “quiet” life of the province there can be a sense of oppression and an environment rich in violence, although more reassuring than “modern” life.

A universal and disorderly **chaos**, it would be said. Here Driessen thematicizes a kind of male inability towards modern times, but not only. The man's own inability to the female figure is represented in all three stories. The female characters, although in the first two stories appear sporadically (in the first

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produce a kind of mirror effect for the male protagonists, that is, both are unable to find solutions to the mocking fate, the famous free will mentioned above. Just as at the end of the previous story, myth and reality seem to merge again. This short circuit causes both the raft Konrad and the bourgeois Julius to recognize only in the river their *raison d'Etre*. "He was a rafter and did the same work as people before him; There was nothing so special, but he knew that he could never feel more happiness than that," the narrator points out about Konrad. The story ends in the sign of incommunicability and non-change. Although Konrad and Julius have different lives and different backgrounds, they live the same precarious situation, in terms of affections and the possibility of imagining a brighter future.

The Myth of the Eternal Return

"The eternal hourglass of existence is always turned upside down again, and you with it, a speck of dust!" F. Nietzsche, [The Gay Science](#)

"The myth of cyclical periodicity, that is, of the eternal return[...] These guidelines overlook not only historicalism, but also history as such. We believe that it is founded to discover in them, more than a resistance to history, a revolt against historical time, an attempt to reintegrate this historical time, full of human experience, in cosmic, cyclical and infinite time. In any case. it is worth

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Uroboro, the snake that bites its tail, an esoteric symbol of the cyclicity of time.

*James Joyce – is traveled, in all its depth, by the nostalgia of the myth of eternal repetition and, at the end of the day, the **abolition of time**. Mircea Eliade, The Myth of Eternal Return.*

Archetypes and repetitions

Following this pattern, there would seem to be no escape from this sword of Damocles that afflicts all the characters in the first two stories. Driessen would seem to own *"the idea that Life cannot be repaired, but only recreated"*, as Mircea Eliade says in his The Myth of the Eternal **Return**. But in the last story, *Pierre and Adèle*, Driessen still mixes the cards on the table.

In France, two families have clashed for centuries over a plot of land divided in half by a stream. Here

families. This dispute takes on religious tones: on the one hand we find the Protestant Corbé, on the other the spouses Chrétien, Adèle and Corentin, Catholics. Here the myth of the eternal return is represented by the many biblical references of the text, which the characters use as they see fit to help shape their reality: *"The only idea he had of himself was related to his role in the order of things as the Bible had taught him."* Meanwhile, Corentin turns out to be a (other) violent alcoholic and his wife Adèle only feels revulsion for him. To support this there are statues depicting Our Lady that symbolize almost a femininity paralyzed by the patriarchal religion.

*"We are in the 20th century, in Versailles we are working on a peace treaty that will banish war from the world once and for all, and these families pass on their feud from father to son. **The sleep of reason generates monsters,**"* says the Jewish lawyer Salomon (also a far from random reference), called as a mediator of the ongoing dispute. A violent outcome of the dispute (which takes place in part) would therefore be prefaced, with the two factions not giving up their principles and tradition. Instead, in the finale we see a real catharsis, which reflects the subtitle of the story, taken from Mozart's *Magic Flute*, *"It will be purified by Fire, Water, Air and Earth"*. Like the work just mentioned, history mixes serious work, funny work, sacred representations, thus ending up being also a romantic work, where the reversal of

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river as a executioner or symbol of boundaries that cannot be crossed for man is broken; instead, we are witnessing a triumph of the human capacity to overcome prejudices.

"Pierre resembled a sinner of the grotesque world of Gustave Dorè, who returned to the scene of a crime of which he himself was a victim to remedy it," the latest story reads. The surprising part of *Rivers* is precisely this continuous exploration of the "primitive" and wild side of man, which does not necessarily lead to an evolution in terms of plot or character. Driessen fuses the myth with allusions to literature, theatre, art and music, and his stories are like a knife blade: beauty lies in grasping the depth of each story between its folds and layers. It feels like we're in *the Los desastres de la guerre Goya*. Like the Spanish painter, Driessen's ability lies in creating a series of engravings to witness, or denounce, the brutality of man and the failure of ideas of freedom.

— PREVIOUS
PROPERTY

The anatomical intrusion.

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skeletons of Giovanna Rivero

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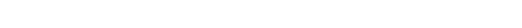
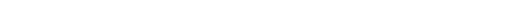
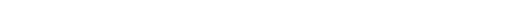
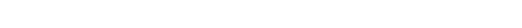
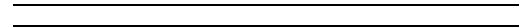
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