Cosmographical Performance

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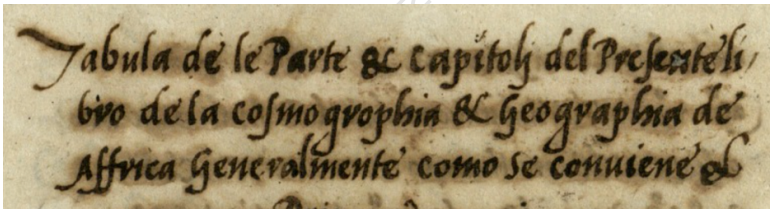
In academic literary departments, the study of performance tends to be distinct from the study of texts; the latter examines the words of *King Lear* in the Arden Shakespeare, or the First Folio, the former considers what use those words are put to onstage, or beyond. But texts are also, of course, performances. This can be quite literal. In 1999 the artist Emma Kay (1961–) produced a piece entitled *Worldview* for the *Abracadabra* contemporary art show at the Tate Gallery, London; it is a large, printed 'text work'—the gallery's phrase—containing a description of the history of the universe as Kay subjectively remembered it, without recourse to books or other resources. It begins, 'In the universe, an infinite space which cannot be measured, before the beginning of time, there existed an infinite number of galaxies and solar systems, composed of groups of planets and stars.' It ends, almost, banally, and proleptically, 'The year 2000 AD simply marked 2000 years after the birth of Christ, which made it a Christian celebration.'[1] The value of the work as a whole, which was subsequently printed in book form, is not in any information it might convey, but as the record of a (fallible) performance, a feat of memory but also of forgetting; as Jan Verwoert has put it, *Worldview* plays on tensions between 'personal memory performances' and the bottomless archives of data embodied in, and made easily accessible by, modern technology.[2]

It has been a commonplace since Ann Blair to compare the 'information overload' facilitated by print in the sixteenth century to our contemporary digital situation. This paper is about a textual performance from that era in some ways comparable to Kay's, namely the bestselling treatise by Johannes Leo Africanus, commonly known as the *Description of Africa* but labelled in the manuscript itself as the *Cosmography and Geography of Africa*.[3] Leo, born al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan in Granada c. 1490 and raised in Fez,


Tabula de le Parte & capitoli del Presente li
bro de la cosmographia & Geographia de
Affrica Generalmente como se conuiene &

[1] Emma Kay, *Worldview* (London, 1999), pp. 3, 212.

[2] https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2001/hammer-projects-emma-kay

[3] I am currently in the middle of translating this work, from the sole surviving Italian manuscript, in collaboration with Dr Richard Oosterhoff at the University of Edinburgh. The translation is contracted with Penguin Classics and will hopefully be published in late 2022.

Morocco, enjoyed a career as a diplomat in the service of the Wattasid sultan Muhammad al-Burtuqali (r. 1504–26). Muhammad's nickname, 'the Portuguese'—deriving from a childhood spell of seven years as prisoner to king Afonso V, 'the African'—gives some insight into the relations between North Africa and Catholic Europe during the period. Leo, meanwhile, was captured in June 1518 by Christian pirates and brought to Rome, where he was imprisoned in the Castel Sant'Angelo and later baptised by Pope Leo X, who freed him and gave him a commission to compose the book for which he is now most famous. It was, he claimed, to be only one part of a tripartite treatise on Europe, Asia and Africa, given in descending order of importance; the first two parts, however, were apparently never written. The *Cosmography of Africa* survives in a single known manuscript dated 1526, though rediscovered only in 1930. The version known for most of its history was printed in 1550 by the Venetian geographer Giovanni Battista Ramusio; we now know it to have been extensively rewritten and edited. It was this version that was translated into Latin in 1556 by the obscure schoolmaster Jan Bloemaert or Florianus, and from there into English by John Pory, an associate of Richard Hakluyt, in 1600. Unfortunately Florianus's Latin version, which seems to have been the one most widely read across Europe down to the nineteenth century, was comically and notoriously inaccurate; in a rectorial address of 1801, Leo's German translator Georg Wilhelm Lorsbach claimed to have spotted six hundred (*sexcenta*) errors in it—although admittedly *sexcenta* is standard Latin for 'a bloody lot'.[4]

The *Cosmography* is a survey, done from memory, of North African geography, history, culture, flora and fauna; it is arranged by place, divided up according to standard Arabic topographical categories: Barbary (or the Maghreb), Numidia, Libya, the 'Black Land' (what we now call Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan), and Egypt, with an introductory book and a final one on rivers, animals and plants. Within each of these parts, the work is further divided into kingdoms, provinces, territories and settlements. In other words, we are dealing with a geographical encyclopaedia—putatively, that is, with a world of stable facts—albeit one that breaks unexpectedly into historical digressions and personal reminiscences. It combines book learning with first-hand experience, but in the 1520s both of these were at some remove. Although Leo had access to some Arabic works in the Vatican Library, he emphasises both his distance from books and his variable powers of recollection, for instance here, speaking of himself, as always, in the third person:

> It can be seen just how weak the compiler's memory is on this subject. It seems to have been ten years since he saw any book on Arabic history, although, because he has met

[4] Georg Wilhelm Lorsbach, *Solemnia academica* (Herborn, 1801), p. 7.

> and conversed with almost all the Arab peoples mentioned above, some of the history remains imprinted in his memory.[5]

Leo mentions a number of books, most of them encyclopaedic or cosmographical works like his own—Ibn Khaldun's *Prolegomena*, al-Mas'udi's *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*,[6] al-Bakri's *Book of Roads and Kingdoms*, Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, but also the story collection *Maqamat al-Hariri*, Ibn al-Farid's allegorical *Poem of the Sufi Way*, and other works. His citations are always vague and sometimes flatly incorrect, as one might expect from a distance of ten years. His assertions about the world itself are more precise but just as unreliable; his reconstructions of wars and other historical events, for instance, are frequently difficult to situate in, or square with, the known facts, and his estimations of quantities and distances are rarely plausible or accurate, even taking into account the word 'circa' that universally prefixes them. (Can Leo really know that the Oulad Dalim tribe in the Libyan desert numbered ten thousand men, including four hundred cavalry? Or that the governor of Touggourt received an annual revenue of 130,000 ducats?)

The *Cosmography* is therefore the assertion of a performance that exceeds credibility: not, I think, a calculating fraud, so much as the attempt to recreate a literary genre, and a specifically Islamic one, without the library resources enjoyed by his predecessors. Perhaps we may liken it to an episode he witnessed among the Cairene *sakkas* or water-carriers, one of whom was challenged to carry a calfskin full of water, fastened with an iron chain around his bare shoulders, for a week; although by the sixth day the chain had cut deep into his flesh, 'he kept up the pretence [*perfidia*] and so triumphed in pride'.[7] An innately competitive man, Leo wanted to complete his own scholarly challenge, even if he had to paper over some of the inevitable gaps in his abilities.

For one thing, he must have wanted to prove the merits of his own culture to his Italian hosts, patrons and former captors: the *Cosmography* is not just a performance, it is a performance *for* European readers. Strikingly, the work is often disparaging about Africa, but its criticisms are made on behalf of a learned, God-fearing, law-abiding Islamic culture. This Leo strives to convey to his Italian readers by finding European and Christian equivalents for his key terms: a mosque is called a *tempio*, an imam a *sacerdote*, a caliph a *pontifice*, a hammam a *stufa*, Eid al-Fitr *Pascha*, i.e., Easter.

[5] Johannes Leo Africanus, *Cosmographia de l'Affrica*, ed. Gabriele Amadori (Rome, 2014), p. 151.

[6] This book is as intriguing as it sounds, and can be read in French translation as *Les Prairies d'or*, ed. and tr. C. Barbier de Meynard and Abel Pavet de Courteille, 9 vols—yes, that's the catch—(Paris, 1861).

[7] Leo, *Cosmographia*, ed. Amadori, p. 554.

The book's rhetoric draws Christian readers in and helps them understand the African world, but also stuns them with its alterity: in the section on animals, for instance, Leo announces that he will describe only the ones not found in Europe or different from their European counterparts. The *Cosmography* never quite reconciles its pull and push, its analogies and its wonders.

Moreover, Leo not only performs his memory of Africa for his readers, he remembers acts of remembrance that were themselves performative. In a chapter on the Moroccan necropolis at Chellah, he recalls staying there in 915 / 1509 until he had written down all the epitaphs; in a section on the tombs outside Fez he remembers, as a still younger man, attempting to compile all the epitaphs in Barbary, placing them 'in a work of many chapters on the terrible grief, sadness and bitterness of death', as a gift for the sultan's brother on the death of his father. Throughout the description of the province of Tamasna he laments the destruction brought on by the siege of Fez in 1411: thus of Anfa (modern Casablanca) he writes that he has visited many times, 'and the sight made him weep despite himself', while in Rabat he experiences 'a deep melancholy for the vast difference between the life of the world when the city was founded, and its life today'. In exile Leo looks back sadly to a time at which he was already looking back sadly, and what appears on the page as a result is, like the extant ruins of African towns, mingled with forgetting. As Kierkegaard put it, 'The more poetically one remembers, the easier one forgets; for remembering poetically is really only another expression for forgetting. In a poetic memory the experience has undergone a transformation, by which it has lost all its painful aspects.'[8] So the act of writing, of recording, of performing, transforms the experience of exile; it cannot but be 'poetic'.

The performances recounted in the *Cosmography* are not just memorial, of course, and not just his own. Natalie Zemon Davis is about to publish a short book, *Leo Africanus Discovers Comedy: Theatre and Poetry across the Mediterranean*, and the papers she has delivered from the project discuss some of Leo's short references to quasi-theatrical public recitals in Fez and elsewhere.[9] But these only scratch the surface of the world he describes, which was performative through and through. In this respect it was no different from Renaissance Europe, or indeed the world at large today, although the unfamiliarity of the performances he described would have stood out as such to his Italian readers. For instance, the marriage ritual in which the bride, after her first spin in the sack

[8] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either / Or*, tr. David and Lillian Swenson, 2 vols (London, 1944), I, p. 240.

[9] See her 2017 lecture 'Leo Africanus Discovers Comedy: Sixteenth Century Theatre Across the Mediterranean Divide', online at https://www.medievalists.net/2019/05/leo-africanus-discovers-comedy-sixteenth-century-theatre-across-the-mediterranean-divide.

with her new husband, would bring out her blood-stained underwear to a woman waiting by the bedroom door, who in turn would parade it to the two families as a joyful proof that the bride had been a virgin.[10] Or the custom of sprinkling dirt over one's head and shoulders before addressing the king of Timbuktu. Or the members of Leo's entourage who must prove, on passing through a ksar in Numidia, that they are Muslim—and therefore not liable to a higher toll payment—by reciting the appopriate prayers. Or the 'dangerous' hocus-pocus of *za'irja*, a magical art involving the manipulation of letters and numbers inscribed in concentric circles, the physical construction of which could take up half the courtyard of a madrasa and last a whole summer day.

All these examples are public demonstrations or disclosures of the invisible, a translation from the inner to the outer as a recognisable pattern or form. This is the sense in which I take the term 'performance', and it encompasses as well the more usual literary sense of a theatrical show, which also translates a cognitive object—not the text of a play, but its idea and meanings—into a visible display. The more general concept is important for understanding the *Cosmography* because the book is itself not only a memory performance, as we have said, but the disclosure or projection of an invisible idea, namely the idea of Africa. Moreover, some of the work's formal features tell us about the nature of that idea. For instance, Leo's descriptions of performances, both literal and figurative, are sometimes signalled by an abrupt shift in register, as if gliding in oral reminiscence from one mode to another. Watch how Leo narrates a weekend show in the Cairene suburb of Bab al-Louq (the punctuation and paragraph breaks are ours):

> In the middle of the square gather many mountebanks and musicians, as well as those who make camels, donkeys and dogs dance—an extraordinary spectacle, especially the donkeys, for after one dances a little its master will say, 'Well, my dear donkey, this is new: the sultan wishes to build something, and plans to use all the donkeys in Cairo to carry mortar, stones and such like'. Hearing these words, the animal at once falls to the ground, sticks its legs up in the air, puffs out its belly and shuts its eyes as if dead.
>
> The master then says to the crowd: 'O my lords! I've lost my donkey to please you; I pray you repair the loss!' The bystanders all know the custom, giving him a penny or

[10] The Finnish anthropologist Edvard Westermarck, in his eyewitness account *Marriage Ceremonies in Morocco* (London, 1914), p. 228, records the local name of this ceremony as *s-sarwal* or 'the drawers'. Unsurprisingly, euphemism is ubiquitous: Leo's word for the garment in question is *calzone*, literally 'stocking', while Ramusio uses *drappo*, 'cloth', Florianus *linteolum*, 'linen cloth', and Pory 'napkin' or handkerchief. It has been suggested that Pory's image of the bloody, depucelated cloth is a source for the spotted handkerchief (also called a 'napkin') that forms the crux of Iago's treachery in *Othello*: see T. G. A. Nelson and Charles Haines, 'Othello's Unconsummated Marriage', *Essays in Criticism* 33 (1983), 1–18, at p. 8.

two, until he has finished the collection. Then he says, 'My lords, don't worry! I think my donkey isn't dead, but he knows how poor his master is and is putting on this show until I have enough cash to buy his fodder. Now watch, my lords!' Suddenly he calls, 'My donkey!' It continues to play dead, and he beats it but still it doesn't move, until he says, 'My lords, have you heard the news?'

They reply, 'Tell us, maestro!' and he announces, 'My lords, His Majesty the sultan has decreed that all the people of Cairo leave the city tomorrow morning to watch his procession, and that all the city's noblewomen and beauties ride fine donkeys and give them good barley and water from the Nile.' The donkey leaps to his feet and swaggers about, full of joy.

Then the master adds, 'Unfortunately, the warden of the district where I live has asked to borrow my donkey for his aged wife.' When it hears these words, the donkey at once starts limping as if in pain.

The master exclaims, 'Look, my lords, my donkey doesn't want the old woman!' And then: 'My donkey, would you like to marry?' The animal replies by nodding its head, and its master says, 'Well then, look around for a woman who pleases you more, show her to me!' The donkey goes around the crowd, peering at the women who stand around watching it, and when it sees one who is younger and more honourable, it touches her with its head. All the bystanders cry out loudly and tease her, 'Hey look, it's the donkey's wife!' And in a trice the master mounts his animal and rides off to perform another trick elsewhere.[11]

The first paragraph hosts a transition from the geographer's present to a storyteller's present, grammatically identical (though we have used the future tense in our translation to distinguish them) but functionally dissimilar:

& in mezo de la Piaza se reducono molti ciarlatani & sonatori & quilli che fanno ballare li camelli & li Asini & li cani cosa molto mirabile maxime de l'Asino peroche quello che lo fa ballare quando lo d[ict]o Asino ha ballato un pocho El Patrone comencia a dire alhora Asino. . . [12] [underlinings mine]

[11] Leo, *Cosmographia*, ed. Amadori, pp. 545–6.

[12] Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, MS V.E. 953, fol. 408v

While remaining in the present tense, we have moved from a timeless city always bustling with performers, an eternal Covent Garden of the mind, to the narration of a specific event, complete with temporality as indicated by the perfect tense of the subordinate clause, 'quando lo dicto Asino ha ballato'. The implication of the shift is that this is not a specific event at all, but something that happens often, whether it is an identical performance repeated each week like a repertory drama, apparently with the full cooperation of a histrionic donkey, or just one instance of a family of similar performances. The jeering crowd, too, play their part with pleasure, as in a modern pantomime: they know that they are an inextricable part of the whole action.

It is a remarkable feature of Leo's Africa that it constantly hovers on the border between these two presents, and between them and the historical past. Here is another example, from his account of the Maristan of Sidi Frej, a hospital and asylum in Fez where Leo had worked as a notary for two years during his student days in the city:

> The hospital has rooms set aside for madmen who throw rocks and do other kinds of mischief, but who are kept locked and chained in the rooms. . . When he enters to give them food, the warden always carries a large stick, and if he sees anyone move he hits them with it and chases them. Sometimes, when they see a strange visitor, they call to him and one of them will complain that the officers are keeping him prisoner, because he has already been cured. When the visitor hears this he believes them and approaches to see them better, and then they grab his hand and drag him in by his clothes, taking their shit in their other hand and throwing it on him.[13]

It surely cannot be the case that Leo has witnessed this more than once or twice, but instead of phrasing it in the past tense as an amusing episode, he stages it as a perennial event ('sometimes') that seems of a piece with the fixed reality of the hospital itself. In other words, the *cosmos* of the *Cosmographia* is not simply a listing of geographical features and the distances between them, but a site for living performance. And the temporal ambiguity is mirrored by an ambiguity of number: there is one visitor but multiple assailants with 'their other hand', because in any given performance of this ritual, any one of the crowd of unnamed inmates may take the lead rôle.

Leo knows perfectly well that such episodes will catch the eye, or ear, of his Italian audience. His goal is usually to amuse, or shock, or both, apparently an inalienable element of his exercised

[13] Leo, *Cosmographia*, ed. Amadori, p. 277.

memory, and one which will in turn aid the memory of his readers. The effect is not always achieved with the ambiguous present. Sometimes it invokes the simple past of an eyewitness account, albeit one that shades over into a novelist's omniscient narration:

> In the Bain al-Qasrayn square in Cairo the compiler saw [a Sufi] grab a beauty leaving the hammam, lay her down in the middle of the square and have it off with her in full view of the people—he even saw the semen spurt from his prick. They prayed to God to grant this holy man grace and benediction, that he might father some perfect creature on the world; some said he only pretended to commit the crime but didn't actually do so. The moment he left the woman, everyone ran to touch her clothes in their devotion, because she had been touched by a holy man. Some went to give the husband the good news and congratulate him, and the next day the fool held a banquet for many elders of various orders, and did this as great alms, thanking God for such a blessing.[14]

Here the story seems like an extraordinary, isolated event, like all the other events that Leo tells us are extraordinary, wondrous, marvellous. But in fact it is adduced to illustrate the depravity of the Sufis, who cloak their secret holiness in the most sordid crimes, just as the Victorian moralist Charles Kingsley wrote of his beloved Rabelais: 'all this great light wilfully hidden, not under a bushel, but under a dunghill'.[15] It is no longer just an event, a violation: it becomes in Leo's telling also a performance, with the victims and bystanders playing their own parts, a tangible disclosure of intangible Sufi wickedness, serving *cosmographically* as a vivid instance of the sort of timeless facts we are led to expect from such a work. Nevertheless, it also asserts its own, more exciting mode of reality. It should come as no surprise that prudish Ramusio, and after him Florianus and Pory, gradually shave this tension away to produce an increasingly more conventional, and moralised, encyclopaedia entry:

> These lewd miscreants under pretence of their religion run like roagues naked and savage throughout all Africa, having so little regarde of honestie or shame, that they will like brute beastes ravish women in publike places; and yet forsooth the grosse common people reverence them as men of woonderfull holines. (Pory)

[14] Leo, *Cosmographia*, ed. Amadori, p. 313.

[15] Charles Kingsley, 'The Explosive Forces', in his *Three Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution on the Ancien Regime* (London, 1867), p. 99.

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If the *Cosmography* is a performance of Africa, and shows this partly by staging individual events as performances, it is revealed as such only by another performance—our own. In his 2004 book, *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge explores the idea of reading, and specifically reading literature, as a performance event that renews the uniqueness of a work each time.[16] As he summarises his position:

> Reading a work. . . makes it happen, 'enacts' it in a way which is ambiguous—like the word "act"—as to its initiatory and mimetic functions. More specifically, a reading is a performance of the singularity and otherness of the writing that constitutes the work as it comes into being for a particular reader in a particular context. (87)

In this one respect, and in a few others, Attridge had been anticipated, at a time when poststructuralism was still a glint in the milkman's eye, by the Princeton literary critic R. P. Blackmur, a rather forgotten figure today but one whose works merit revisiting. His essay-manifesto, 'A Burden for Critics', published in the first volume of *The Hudson Review* in 1948, evinces a delight in wordplay closer to Ruskin than Derrida, for the burden of the title is meant both in the musical and the ethical Kipling sense. Blackmur wanted a form of criticism that brought literature alive: 'The beauty of literature is that it is exigent in the mind and will not only stand still but indeed never comes fully into its life of symbolic action until criticism has taken up the burden of bringing it into performance and finding its relation to the momentum of the whole enterprise.' Performance, which is the critic's burden in both senses, mediates the inert 'beauty' of literature and its 'life of symbolic action'.[17] It is an important word:

> *Perform* is a word of which we forget the singular beauty. Its meaning is: to furnish forth, to complete, to finish, in a sense which is influenced by the ideas clustered in the word

[16] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London, 2004), pp. 95–106. For a critique, see Peter Lamarque, 'Replies to Attridge, Blackburn, Feagin and Harcourt', *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2010), 99–106, esp. 100–101, and for Attridge's reply, see his *The Work of Literature* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 34–7.

[17] To Blackmur's readers in the 1940s, the phrase 'symbolic action' would have evoked the avant-garde literary theory of Kenneth Burke.

> *form*; so that performance is an enlightening name for one of our richest activities, rich with extra life.[18]

Blackmur is drawing our attention to the word's double root: in a strict sense its second syllable derives from the root of *furnish*, not *form*, and yet, as the *OED* confirms, *form* has helped shape it by proximity, in the way that *house* moulded *chartreuse* into *charterhouse*, or *piece* moulded *frontispicium* into *frontispiece*. In fact, that moulding might itself be thought of as a sort of performance: *form* has performed *perform* both in completing the sense and in revealing its inner life. I earlier defined performance as 'the translation from the inner to the outer as a recognisable pattern or form', and it now seems that the 'form' is a key part of both the word and its definition.

Whereas Attridge talks generally about the reading of literature, Blackmur focuses his thoughts specifically on *criticism*, understood in both an Aristotelian sense as discernment (*diairesis*) and in an Arnoldian sense as a preparation for literature itself. I'd like to hold on to Blackmur's rarefied category of criticism, that is, the category of what we do specifically as scholarly readers, because unlike mere reading it also requires *writing*: writing about writing.[19] Furthermore, the idea of criticism (and not just reading) as a performance of literature offers us a model of personal engagement with past works that is unlike, and in fact opposed to, the common schoolmarmish approach, sometimes pretentiously designated 'critique', of rebuking them for falling short of present moral criteria, or praising them for their alleged subversions of institutional power. To think of ourselves as performing works retains not only our dependence on them but the joy and creative freedom in that dependence. It brings criticism closer to translation, where it should be, and as it has historically been united in the notion of interpretation. In doing so it clarifies the necessarily social aspect of what we do: performance is always performance not just *of* others but *with* and *for* others. We find ourselves in just the same boat as Leo, but also as Ramusio, Florianus and Pory, trying to work out for ourselves what we want from the book, why we are reading it, what we make of it, what we will write in reply—including, in my case, an English *Cosmography*, full of anxieties about the words chosen—and to whom, for whom, we are writing.

There have been performances of the *Cosmography*, or moments from it, for almost half a millennium. There are, first of all, the translations and editions. In the Anglophone world, most

[18] R. P. Blackmur, 'A Burden for Critics', *The Hudson Review* 1 (1948), 170–85, at p. 171.

[19] See recently Jonathan Kramnick, 'Criticism and Truth', *Critical Inquiry* 47 (2021), 218–240.

now read Pory's 1600 English translation in the 1896 Hakluyt Society edition by the Scottish geographer Robert Brown (1842–95), who added extensive notes. The notes are sometimes descriptively neutral, sometimes learned, sometimes amusingly wrong-headed. In his account of Islam, Leo mentions that there are currently two principal 'sects':

> Ma al p[rese]nte non se trovano senon 2 sette cioe quella de lishari la quale se extende per tutta la Affrica e Egipto & Suria & Arabia & tutta la Turchia & laltra e dil Imamia la quale se extende per tutta la Persia & in qualche terra di Iorasan la quale tene el Soffi Re di Persia. (185r)

Or, as we have translated it:

> But today there are only two sects: that of al-Ashari, which extends all over Africa, Egypt, Syria, Arabia and all of Turkey, and that of Imamia, which extends over Persia and some towns in Khorasan ruled by the Sophy, king of Persia.

The reader will have no trouble recognising the two 'sects' (the English is not the perfect word for the Italian *sette*, but that is for another conversation) as Sunni and Shia Islam, the first here named after the orthodox Baghdad theologian Abu al-Hasan 'Alī al-Ash'arī (874–936), the second after the 'first imam' Ali ibn Abi Talib whom Shi'ites regard as Muhammad's divinely appointed successor. Brown, however, only notes: 'These sects of Leshari and Imamia have not nowadays much hold, so far as I can learn in Morocco.'[20] It is easy to laugh at this, but elsewhere Brown, who had travelled in and written on Africa, offers a wealth of contemporary information. Some of it is nakedly colonial in its attitude to the continent, for instance when he remarks that the oasis of Figuig in Numidia 'is likely to figure extensively in the political complications of the future as a point whence a force could advance from Algeria upon Fez.'[21] Nor does he make any bones about his own bigotries: 'The Jews continue to be the gold and silver smiths of Morocco, and practise usury in its most outrageous form, though under names and by subterfuges which soothe the Mussulman conscience.' But then, we remember, Brown was not writing to delight critical historians and undergraduates of the twenty-first century, but to inform late Victorian British

[20] Johannes Leo Africanus, *The Description of Africa*, tr. John Pory, ed. Robert Brown, 3 vols (London, 1896), II, p. 602.

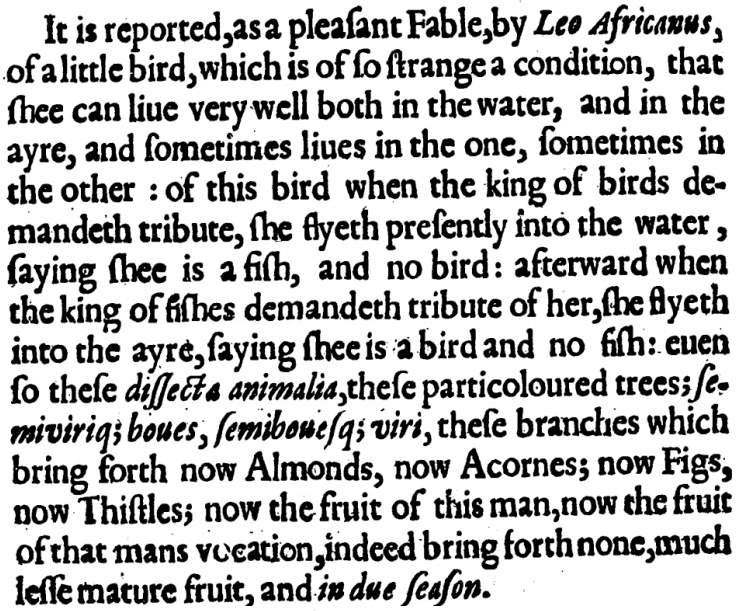
[21] Barely a decade later, Brown's words proved prophetic: see Susan Gilson Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 69–70.

subjects about an 'inferior' but exotic part of the world close to their own political concerns—and to confirm, and sometimes, to be fair, to challenge, their prejudices and stereotypes.

Brown was performing for one audience; the Lebanese novelist Amin Maalouf, who turned Leo into a semi-fictionalised *Léon l'Africain* in 1986, was performing for another; the Flemish anatomist Adriaan van den Spiegel, who borrowed Leo's account of the stained marital underwear to illustrate his account of the hymen in his 1627 treatise *De humani corporis fabrica*, for another; and Herman Melville, who plucked a story about whales from 'the venerable John Leo' to bedizen a chapter of *Moby Dick*, for another. At the risk of a geographical parochialism so foreign to my chief protagonist, I want to end this paper with another Englishman, Thomas Anyan (c. 1582–1633), chaplain to the chancellor of Oxford University Lord Ellesmere, and a man subsequently accused of riotous living, 'drunkenness, adultery, and sodomy' (*ODNB*). In a sermon delivered at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin on 12 July 1612, Anyan expounded the third verse of the first Psalm, describing the blessed man: 'He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of waters, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season.'[22] In explicating the last phrase, Anyan identified the 'fruit' (Heb. **פִּרְי**, *pirei*, the same word used for the fruit in the Garden of Eden, Gen 3:2–3) with the 'fruit of the spirit' and 'fruit of righteousness' mentioned by St Paul (Gal. 5:22, Phil. 1:11). He went on to note that we are instructed not only to bring forth fruit, but to bring forth *our own* fruit, that is, to cultivate the skills given us by God. Every man to his own ordained place in life, no man above his station; *ne sutor ultra crepidam*. A precept as ancient as Western thought, but one expressed with a striking modernity, not so very far off our idiom of authenticity: the commandment, he told his congregation, was to produce the fruit 'peculiar to [thy] vocation. . . least seeking to be what others are, thou loose thy selfe; in seeking to be every body, thou prove to be no body'.[23] It was at this moment, near the end of his sermon, as his audience were starting to fidget, that Anyan, evidently an accomplished performer in the pulpit, or at least in the study, decided to spice things up a bit with a tale he remembered from—*The Cosmography of Africa*.

[22] The translation given in the text is notably closer to the just-published King James Version ('a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit') than the more commonly used Geneva Bible ('a tree planted by the rivers of waters, that will bring forth her fruits').

[23] Thomas Anyan, *A Sermon Preached at S. Maries Church in Oxford, the 12. of Iuly. 1612* (London, 1612), p. 21.



It is reported, as a pleaſant Fable, by *Leo Africanus*, of a little bird, which is of ſo ſtrange a condition, that ſhee can liue very well both in the water, and in the ayre, and ſometimes liues in the one, ſometimes in the other: of this bird when the king of birds demandeth tribute, ſhe flyeth preſently into the water, ſaying ſhee is a fiſh, and no bird: afterward when the king of fiſhes demandeth tribute of her, ſhe flyeth into the ayre, ſaying ſhee is a bird and no fiſh: euen ſo theſe *diſſecta animalia*, theſe particoloured trees; *ſemiviriq; boues, ſemiboueſq; viri*, theſe branches which bring forth now Almonds, now Acornes; now Figs, now Thiſtles; now the fruit of this man, now the fruit of that mans vocation, indeed bring forth none, much leſſe mature fruit, and *in due ſeaſon*.

There is much to unpack here. For Anyan the amphibious bird is to be abhorred as contrary to the spirit of the Psalmist because it does not stay in its own place; in this respect it is like the 'particolored trees', whatever they are, and 'the half-ox men and the half-man oxen' (*semivirique boves semibovesque viri*) whose appearance, in Wicklow and Glendalough respectively, were recorded in 1188 by the colonialist mythographer Gerald of Wales (*Topographia Hibernica* II.21).[24] But if we turn back to Leo's story, we find a quite different message:

> I will do as that bird does. . . that could live underwater as well as on land. When the king of the birds arrived to demand tribute from them, the bird at once dived into the water and said to the fish: "You know me, I'm always with you. That lazy king of the birds has demanded tribute from me—what do you make of that?" The fish replied: "He demanded tribute from you? What an idler! Let him come to us: we'll show him what tribute he'll get from you!" So the bird remained there, most comforted and consoled. Then, after a year, the king of the fish arrived to demand his tribute. When the other fish gave him their tribute, the bird darted from the water and fled back to the birds, to whom he gave the same excuse. By this tale the compiler means to imply that when he sees an advantage, he'll always go for it. For instance, if the Africans are being insulted, he'll come up with the obvious excuse that he was not born there but in

[24] 'Animal monstruosum, animal irrationale, omni penitus tam ratione quam oratione carens. . .'

> Granada; or when the Granadines are being insulted he'll give another excuse, that he was not raised there and does not even remember it.[25]

This is perhaps the most famous passage in the *Cosmography*; the story has been embraced by many early modernist critics, and Natalie Zemon Davis made it the foundation of her book-length portrait of Leo the 'trickster' in 2007.[26] It is, we might now point out, the sharpest expression of Leo's taste for performance. Put next to Anyan's sermon a century later, we see an irreconcilable opposition: the demand for divine order, and a plea for flexibility. Anyan included the tale to draw a contrary meaning from it, but it has its own life, like the nugget about the Sufi in Leo's original work: it performs not just on the preacher's behalf, but for itself, and more than one member of the congregation must have wondered if the 'little bird' was not so bad after all—and moreover, if it would not be quite fun to have a tree that produced almonds, acorns and figs, and moreover, if perhaps that rigid order extolled by Anyan might not be all it was cracked up to be?

*

A character in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*—one of the greatest novels ever written about performance, both literal and figurative, and a must-read for Shakespeare scholars—asserts that 'whoever can play only himself is no actor; whoever cannot change himself in thought and form [*Gestalt*] into many forms deserves not that name.'[27] To perform the *Cosmography*, here and now, in whatever capacity we will, we must respect our moment and our audience; but we must also be actors, alive to the infinite and unpredictable possibilities of self-transformation.

[25] Leo, *Cosmographia*, ed. Amadori, p. 176.

[26] See also Bernadette Andrea, 'Assimilation or Dissimulation: Leo Africanus's *Geographical Historie of Africa* and the Parable of Amphibia', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 32 (2001), 7–29; Jonathan Burton, '"A most wily bird": Leo Africanus, *Othello* and the Trafficking in Difference', in *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, ed. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (London, 2003), pp. 55–75.

[27] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, ed. Emil Staiger (Frankfurt a.M., 1970), p. 592 (VIII.5): '[W]er sich nur selbst spielen kann, kein Schauspieler ist. Wer sich nicht dem Sinn und der Gestalt nach in viele Gestalten verwandeln kann, verdient nicht diesen Namen.'