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Aciman, André (2021), *Homo Irrealis: Essays*, London, Faber & Faber Limited

Recensão

André Aciman is a distinguished Professor in comparative literature at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, who received a Ph.D and A.M. from the Harvard University, and the editor of The Proust Project. Aciman became an acclaimed novelist and a *New York Times* bestselling author with the publication of *Out of Egypt: a Memoir* (1995) and *Call Me by Your Name* (2007), which was adapted to cinema by the Italian director, Luca Guadagnino (2017). Prolific novelist and essayist, Aciman's list of publications also include: *Eight White Nights* (2010), *False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory* (2000), *Alibis: Essays on Elsewhere* (2011), *Harvard Square* (2013), *Enigma Variations* (2017), and *Find Me* (2019).

Aciman's new collection of creative essays addresses that sentiment of dislocation already present in *Out of Egypt*, *False Papers* and *Alibis*, but this time the author offers it a name – Irrealis Mood – while exploring a new, hybrid form. *Homo Irrealis* is, indeed, an *opus* that defies categorization and that provides, as Dani Shapiro calls it, a “meta-experience”¹ to the reader. The seventeen essays, including the introduction, are fluid in their objects of analysis, but united in a sort of stream of consciousness channelled by a characteristic existential angst and a continuous dialogue with other artists in a pursuit of deeper meanings in Literature, the Arts and life itself. Their tone is candid, honest and utterly vulnerable, which envelops the reader from the start. As the title implies, the irrealis moods concept is the cornerstone of the collection. A term borrowed from the linguistics to refer to a set of grammatical moods to express unreality, irrealis mood is that dimension of time that indicates that something has not yet taken place: “a *might-have-been* that *hadn't happened yet but wasn't unreal for not happening and might still happen, though [one] feared it never would and sometimes wished it wouldn't happen just yet*” (10). Guided by this unstable but inherently human concept, Aciman leads the reader through reflexions on his life through the lens of other artists (Constantine P. Cavafy, W. G. Sebald, Éric Rohmer, Marcel Proust, Fernando Pessoa, Ludwig van Beethoven, among others) and even Sigmund Freud.

Irrealis moods, though transversal to all essays, could be clustered under three major motifs: Aciman's irrealis identity also shared by the artists he reflects on, *irrealis cities* through

which Aciman navigates, and *irrealis lives* led by the fictional characters Aciman evokes.

IRREALIS IDENTITY: “I have no boundaries. Sometimes I think I am all shadow” (225). Only through the works of others can Aciman understand himself, the author explains. However, it is also clear the way in which he also projects art in his own life. His personal experiences are always filtered by art in its various modes. The sort of intermediality that permeates Aciman’s experiences of the real is the constant paradox in his fiction and in his own identity – an *irrealis* identity always in transit geographically, intellectually and emotionally. The reader gets the constant atmosphere of the “in-between”, in-between times and spaces, in-between art and life, and becomes completely absorbed by it. The introduction is the perfect starting point for the collection. Revisiting his fourteenth-year-old self, at that moment preparing to leave Alexandria with his family and to embark on an involuntary exile to Europe, Aciman openly portrays that inner conflict one faces, on the one hand, when leaving a place which has become hostile and yet one knows it will be eventually missed, and, on the other hand, the expectation for a new life elsewhere (Europe, Paris), some new location that already exists in one’s mind. The photograph of a teenage Aciman in Egypt (11) no longer portrays a young man in his homeland, but a young Aciman already travelling towards a place in the future; and, curiously, in that mental future space, Aciman is already missing Alexandria.

This endless inner traffic of always being elsewhere is endemic to diaspora and exile: the longing for places that ceased to exist, exist only in other people’s memories or do not exist at all. These places are always in the horizon or in the past. They are either anachronistic or utopian – unattainable, unreachable to us. It is this sentiment that Aciman’s writing mostly expresses – that feeling of being somewhere else, in-between dimensions, and outside of the here-and-now. As in the epigraph by Fernando Pessoa chosen to open the collection, Aciman stands between the gap of “what I am and what I am not”. An idea that culminates in the final essay, in which Aciman, very much like Pessoa’s “conscious inability to set his feet in one time zone”, seems to inhabit and be inhabited by this *irrealis* mood (236).

IRREALIS CITIES: “I have always meant to roam the city. (...) what you want is to drift along the streets in as flushed and jittery a state of mind as everyone does in Russian novels, hoping that some internal compass helps you find your way about the city you’ve been imagining since your bookish young teens. Stop thinking, shut down everything, and for once go with your feet (165)”. Incorporating almost the Baudelairian ideal of the *flâneur*, Aciman finds himself roaming the streets of *irrealis* cities charged with nostalgia and in constant tension between present and memory, reality and imagination, life and projection. In St. Petersburg, he roams the streets retracing the steps of Raskolnikov and Poprishchin in a sort of “paleo-travel”, “searching for what’s underneath, or for what’s no longer quite there” (“Adrift in Sunlit Night”, 166). More than just visiting the places of so much literary significance, the experience, like in so many episodes in these essays, is completely shaped by Aciman’s readings. Fiction ensnared reality until, after a white night, he encounters “the new St. Petersburg” materialized in a family having breakfast at a café called – nothing less than – “Happiness”. Even though it is the first time that the author seems to be living in and enjoying

the present tense, you cannot help but wonder whether even this moment is not another idealized version of reality: again an unrealis moment in an unrealis city. A similar pilgrimage occurs in New York, though with the opposite result.

Tracing C. C. Baxter's apartment portrayed in Billy Wilder's film *The Apartment* (1960), Aciman discovers that it had been demolished in 1983. To add insult to injury, he would later find out that the building in the film had in fact been a set built in Hollywood ("Elsewhere on-Screen"). This is the perfect metaphor for an author always searching for and projecting meanings. Like a mirage, they retract in the horizon, getting farther away, or simply disappearing. During these strolls throughout the city, Aciman visits the sites of vanished theatres and reflects on how "pervasive and irreversible" these changes were (190-191). The changes in the cityscape and the permanent traffic between the visible and the invisible, between the memory and the reality of places, illustrate the negotiation between art, artist and a cherished past; what Leopardi called *le ricordanze*: "remembrance as a creative act, the past eternally preserved, eternally held firm, eternally relived, (...) a past that transcends time" ("Underground", 22, 23). Art is, therefore, retrospective, like in John Sloan's painting *The City from Greenwich Village* (1922), a vigorous and pulsating portrait of a city that "changes even before the paint dries" ("Sloan's Gaslight", 92). Art is indeed how "we quarrel with time" (*ibidem*), trying to fixate a moment that has been already lost and which has the potential to transcend time itself. To the time shifting New York, Aciman adds another dimension: lyricism. Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot's melancholic paintings, for instance, shape the way Aciman perceives Central Park. Adding the filter of a French painter that never set foot in New York, Aciman experiences spaces known to him for most of his adult life and finally sees what has always been in front of his eyes ("Corot's *Ville-d'Avray*").

It is through Freud's eyes that Aciman returns to Rome, the city to which he and his family went in exile after Alexandria. Rome is an unrealis city entangled in several layers of meaning: space, time, psyche and the senses. It is, therefore, not an innocent coincidence that Aciman chose Freud's memoirs as his filter. It has been said that Freud had a "Roman phobia" or a "Rome neurosis" – the longing for a city that one postpones visiting for some reason one is not sure about ("In Freud's Shadow: Part 1"). Yet, once the difficulty is overcome, Freud kept returning to Rome which then attained a mythical entity of multiplicity: first, a Rome unvisited; later, a Rome visited; and finally, a Rome many times revisited – all of them juxtaposed. The mythical Rome that both Freud and Aciman share is a metaphor of itself. An unrealis city that is at the same time past, present and future, all these dimensions intertwined in the actual architecture: "Everything is old and layered here, and epochs (...) are haplessly bundled together, so that you really can't tell one from the other. The new, the modern, the cutting edge always bear traces of the old. It's no different with the people. Romans feel old" (35). There it is, finally, the transcendence of time set in stone. Aciman's own layers of identity clash here, in this unrealis city, where "time is everywhere and nowhere" (*ibidem*). Aciman's Rome lies still "buried and out of sight, elusive, transient, and still unfinished, read: unbuilt" ("In Freud's Shadow: Part 2", 47); a Rome and a life marked by sensuality and desire, by places

where he touched other bodies, longed for other bodies, where desire is or was manifest. Like Elio wandering the streets of Rome revisiting the places he and Oliver marked with a kiss or a special memory (in *Call me by your Name* and *Find Me*), Aciman revisits the places with *remanence*, the memory of something that has vanished, gone underground, and yet exerts its presence (41). The reference to Apollo Sauroktonos by Praxiteles, as the reason for this last visit to Rome, a statue that appeals to the senses and that defies us almost to desire it, is illuminating of Aciman's relationship with Rome – and Italy – as an intangible place, always craving for it but not quite possessing it.

This sentiment towards Rome and its correlation to loss and desire is even more intensified in Aciman's relationship with Alexandria, a city he has not visited ever since his exile except through literature. Although not always evident, Alexandria seems to pulsate through all Aciman's essays: an ever present sense of loss, right there under the skin. In Cavafy's poetry and Laurence Durrell's prose, Aciman revisits that Alexandria lost to the three of them: a city of "transitional identity", provisional, plural, in constant reinvention ("Cavafy's Bed"). As St. Petersburg, Alexandria had been conquered to the sea, so its footing had always been fragile, almost unreal. Always fleeting, and yet always seductive to the senses: the ultimate irrealis city, "always apprehended but never fully discovered, always adumbrated but never really touched", the Alexandria that, "like Ithaca or Byzantium, has always been and will always never be quite there" (73).

IRREALIS LIVES: "Could one ever banish the thought that one has led the wrong life? How could one be happy when faced with daily reminders of so many wasted years?" (76). A colleague's personal experience led Aciman to ponder over the possibility of living "wrong" lives. If one had made a different choice, made a different turn, certainly life would be different. Would it be better though? Coming to terms with the decisions one makes in life is a motif Aciman had already explored in fiction. Paolo in *Enigma Variations* (2017) is possibly the most representative of his characters dealing with the possibility of misspent lives. A constant search for a life other than the one he was leading, Paolo is incapable of accepting life as it is: always pursuing people who he believes have the key to his "right" life, only to eventually find out that these people are not the answer. The answer lies with somebody else, or so he thinks. The thing is, there is no answer. Opportunities – missed, postponed or ignored – haunt Paolo, and us. Paolo is the epitome of displaced souls leading irrealis lives. Rereading W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* (1992), Aciman follows through with this idea of misspent lives: the lives that, due to "transplantation", Sebald's characters were not allowed to lead ("Sebald, Misspent Lives"). Again, time is a fluid dimension, a porous "membrane between what might have been and might yet be, between how things never go away but aren't coming back either" (79).

Because time happens to us, it is a creation of ours, its cruelty resides in its own indifference towards us. In art, however, we may be able to mould it, to control it. According to Aciman, Éric Rohmer's films, for instance, are ruled by "a logic of happenstance" that could not be found in the real world. Form is at the heart of these films; and, "form is both the search for and the discovery of design" ("Evenings with Rohmer: Maud", 113). In Rohmer's section,

time is invariably connected with desire. The kind of desire which is put on hold. Aciman's interpretation of Rohmer's films is the projection of his own need for the intimacy that only candid, unashamed debate can provide: "verbal intimacy trumps physical intimacy each time (...). There is something almost unbearably bold in how Rohmer's characters not only refuse to veil their feelings and intentions but rather go a step further and clearly enjoy the deliberate and near libidinal manner with which they expose their desires, their doubts (...)" ("Evenings with Rohmer: Chloé", 154). The casual meetings, portrayed in Rohmer's films during which these vulnerable conversations occur, are crystalized moments in the characters' irrealis lives. These are the "what if" moments, the accidental encounter made whole and given a future, that Aciman explored in *Find Me* (2019) through the chance meeting between Sami and Miranda, or even Clara and "Oskar" in *Eight White Nights* (2010).

Irrealis lives are built upon rituals and rehearsals, and tainted by regret and remorse. Whereas rehearsal is "the act of repeating what has yet to happen", ritual is "repeating what has already happened" ("Swann's Kiss", 201). Ritual and rehearsal come hand-in-hand with the evil-twin pair: remorse, when you wish to undo what has already been done, and regret, when you wish to have done or said something (232). The Rohmerian male characters are bound by these rehearsals. The women – Maud, Claire, Chloé – are solely an interlude to the men's perfect lives they are about to return to. Whether the male characters end up with regret, however, we can only infer.

Like in Proust, and ultimately Aciman, longing for and extrapolating about an experience is in itself as important as finally living it, because "Experience and fulfillment in the present tense are either ungraspable or of no interest" ("Swann's Kiss", 203). It is curious that the word "almost" has earned the privilege of getting its own essay, but, when really thinking about it, it is hardly a surprise ("Almost There"). As a word that is "all about gradations and nuance, about suggestion and shades" (222), it reflects the paradox, the ambiguity and the fluidity that permeates Aciman's writing in all its fronts. It suggests "timidity, not assertion; recession, not dominance" (224). In a word, vulnerability; a sort of vulnerability of being in the fringes of things, in-between spaces and time tenses, where everything is blurred, uncertain. And with this, we come full circle with the statement: "I have no boundaries. Sometimes I think I am all shadow" (225).

Homo Irrealis is a collection of essays in which Aciman dialogues with other artists in a quest for a deeper understanding of Literature and the Arts, and ultimately of himself. These are thus creative essays written in a derivative style aimed at proving nothing. In fact, they are aimed only at self-questioning. In a reference to Joyce's "The Dead", Aciman claims that Joyce "had the audacity not to give up waiting" ("Beethoven's Soufflé in A Minor", 216). The reader ends up sharing in this irrealis voyage of waiting for some sort of epiphany or a set-in-stone conclusion, which never comes, because, in life – as in art – permanent conclusions are rare. Yet, it is in this folding and refolding, layer after layer, time alongside time, space on top of space, artist by artist, that "art hopes to restore order on the fringes of chaos" (217). Taking us on this voyage through his memories, hopes, unfulfilled desires, Aciman allows us to partake

in his own creative process, revisit lost opportunities or postponed pleasures. As he revisits life through the lenses of others, so are we invited to do the same through *his* lens.

As it happened with *Out of Egypt* (1994), it is hard to draw a line between fact and fiction, between memoir and imagination. Possibly because, as far as Aciman is concerned, reality is right there – on the frontier where the real and the imagined meet. This ambiguous undertone – the “in-between” effect – brings to mind Ursula K. Le Guin’s famous words: “Distrust everything I say. I am telling the truth”. In the end, this is what really matters: finding out underlying truths – truths that go beyond the facts –, and trying out other skins. Perhaps, this is the greatest privilege of Literature and the Arts as a whole: the possibility of living other lives alongside our own.

NOTE

¹ See link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utTQTAtV8mA> <Accessed last: 26/03/2021>.