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## Archipelago – A Problem

If I had to describe this novel in a few words, I would say:

Archipelago is a work of an extraordinary erudite exploring an ancient myth – the rape of Philomel (see Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) and putting it in a contemporary context, where it fits seamlessly.

Or:

This deeply ironical piece of written word follows the Wittgensteinian idea of language and deals with the problem of true communication between people, who are seen as islands, or volcanoes in search for ventilation.

Or:

Archipelago is a Joycean novel. It follows the manner of playing with various elements of language, but it is not an imitation of Joyce's style. It is a product of a creative synthesis of Joycean tradition, as TS Eliot puts it, and the individual talent of G H Neale.

Or:

This is a demanding, yet utterly enjoyable, metatextual playing with readers' expectations.

Or even:

At certain aspect, Archipelago is an engaged, feminist novel with elements of lesbian romance – and that is not the most shocking thing about this book.

Or:

I wish I wrote it.

Or... Or...

When I have to write about such a complex subject, I wonder from which point to start. It is especially difficult online because the beginning has to be the most interesting. But now I have your attention, do I? That is important, because I've found a treasure, a hidden literary jewel, and I want to tell you about it.

Who would expect an obscure unknown author to expand and enrich the ideas of the literary ancestors, and push the boundaries so remarkably? Most contemporary authors don't even have the idea where those boundaries could be.

Well, I did have certain expectations about this one in particular. I first noticed GHNeale on Twitter when he mentioned Wittgenstein. At that point, I still couldn't imagine his novel was that amazing.

Enough with praising; let's do some reading. What Archipelago? What a problem? What is it all about?

The titles of the chapters are toponyms – names of the Galápagos islands, one of which was the central character from. But it doesn't matter really. Those could be any islands. The plot is set in Sevenoaks, England, mostly – and that doesn't matter either – it could be any town, real or imaginary.

An island is a metaphor; people and/or languages are the islands. In the chapter called Guy Fawkes, two battered hatted elderly gentlemen mention the cliché – no man is an island – and play with it. In another chapter, Philomena, beautiful word-made protagonist and co-narrator of the novel, slows the story down in the most dramatic moment, and contemplates:

"The artist is the art. Instead of holding a mirror up to reality, the mirror becomes reality, mortals challenging the gods. (...) I wonder if you have to have an experience of things to know about them. I mean, really know. Is the world made up of just facts, things that are and things that are not, paintings and representations, illusions. There could be a hundred-headed serpent waiting for me beyond the hole-in-the-wall. Are there any limits to what you can think about or what can exist? Are there any limits to what can I say? And what if mankind found life on other planets, would we even be able to tell? Language's inability to express the quintessence, for its complexities modulate meaning; is that it? No. It is more than just being all about context too. And yet it is understood; language is not secret. But the reality we have of our lives is something private. We think in language don't we, rather than images, which we do not tell anyone in total. Our languages are our islands."

Contemplation continues and Philomena unexpectedly gets the answer, the most unanticipated one, and I would like to quote the next eleven sentences, but you'll just have to find it yourself.

Philomena is an island, so is Stephen Rei, Parveen Patni, Caleb Williams, Maria Swann, ..., Debra King and Terence King, the mythical king Tereus. They make an archipelago and the Archipelago, the book Philomena writes. Not just Philomena; Stephen Rei also writes Archipelago, so does another, nameless, narrator Sin Nombre. There is a real mystery incorporated here. Most characters are writers, they read each other, and they write. Sometimes is unclear who wrote which paragraph, which inky glyph.

It remains uncertain what really took place in the novel, what is "true" and what is a fiction made up by some of the characters/writers. Because everything is true and everything is made up. But who wrote the first and the final chapter? Who decided Philomena was going to die? Who wrote Terry's chapter? It all remains obscure 'till the end.

Then I've figured out – it is not that relevant. Instead of asking what happened, where and when, we should pay more attention to what was really said in this novel. For it covers almost every single important subject that concerns us as human beings. It has references to (again, almost) every significant literary masterpiece, from Hesiod and Ovid, Shakespeare and Blake, to Beckett and Joyce – just to name a few. It plays with every major literary form, from Homeric verses to the stream of consciousness, dystopian fantasy, theatre of the absurd... It covers important philosophical and social issues. It begins with a medieval topos and appears hermetic but it is not that impenetrable. There are hints and keys everywhere, from symbols which appeal to our collective unconscious to ironical allusions.

Let us take the myth of Philomel for example. G H Neale's Philomena is not a character borrowed from one ancient poem. She is Ovid's Philomel, yes, but she is also mythological Io and Shakespeare's Lavinia. I've read *Metamorphoses* on my first year in college, but I don't remember much detail. On the other hand, I do remember *Titus Andronicus* and, while reading *Archipelago*, I kept recalling the scenes from that horrifying movie I'm never going to forget. Being a scholar is helpful, but not mandatory. Mythical Philomena is more than a character from one particular text; she is an archetype wide known from our cultural heritage.

And finally, Philomena from *Archipelago* is a masterly written and absolutely authentic literary character, unique in contemporary fiction. If I didn't already know, I would never guess the gender of the author who made her: that is the true art.

I still haven't mentioned the most significant aspect of this novel. G H Neale uses various known and less-known literary devices remarkably and his language is free of clichés, but there is even more. The purpose of this novel is not to tell the story. The plot is not the most important, neither are the

characters. Those are devices too. The plot and characters are here to catch our attention, to make us emotionally engaged and force us to keep reading, but what we are reading is more than that. It is an eye-opening literary-philosophical masterpiece.

Archipelago is an intellectually challenging novel, yet it is anything but boring. It is dynamic and humorous. The irony is omnipresent. Some chapters are horrifying, and there are really disgusting things described too, so this book is not for everyone. It does catch the conscious of human being. It is appealing to our every level: intellectual, emotional, physical and, especially, metaphysical. I found those metatextual playings ontologically disturbing – and this is not a snobbish sentence. I got chills when the nameless narrator first spoke to Philomena, not to mention Terence's famous-to-be Procedure #2.88.

I endlessly enjoyed reading Archipelago, if enjoy is an adequate word since this novel doesn't allow you to sit back and relax. It keeps you in a state of constant mental tension and discomfort. It's exhausting at moments and I often needed to take breaks and contemplate. And it is so condensed. One could use any paragraph from this novel and make a separate writing prompt. Yes, there is enough material in this novel to make hundreds of other books.

I shall stop now and let you discover this magnificent archipelago yourself.

This novel will leave a permanent mark on your mind and taste in books. Be brave. Read it.