Moving in and Out of Borders: Othello, Caliban, and Conrad in Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*

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‘I hate the way the ant crawls in and out of my shadow.’
Wallace Stevens, ‘Six Significant Landscapes’

I

The notion of a border has several denotations and connotations. In geophysical terms, a border marks the division between one natural entity and another, as when a line of beach or cliff separates land from water, or a line of trees, bush or grass separates arable land from adjacent spaces. Borders can be artificial as well as natural. In their benign form, as in gardens or embroidery, they distinguish the identity or pattern occupying one space from its neighbors. Good fences make good neighbors, as Robert Frost remarked in a poem. They are the means serving territorial possessiveness. A border is a mark of circumscription: it contains and thus contributes to identity; but it also separates, and thus enforces division. On maps, it is a line; on the ground, it can be a wall or a fence. Even air space can be divided, at least in virtual and political terms; and national from international waters. In social terms, borders are more complex and less easy to identify. In psychic terms, too, they are not always obvious or evident, but they make their powers of cohesion and separation felt as powerfully as barbed wire. The idea of borders which I would like to exemplify has more to do with mental baggage than with zones of geographical and political demarcation, although, as I hope to show, mental or psychic borders have a direct bearing on how we live in socio-cultural and political space. Borders dissemble permanence, but rarely survive for long. In any case, “long” is a relative notion, and some might think that specific borders have already lasted too long: for example, in the Middle East, or Ireland, or on the Indian subcontinent, or in

Korea, and Vietnam. From an altogether different perspective, some might protest that other kinds of border are not always set up firmly enough in the real or virtual spaces where separation seems desirable, as when others intrude upon one’s solitude, or one’s freedom, or one’s way of life.

In some modes of experience, a border is a cultural barrier more often breached than respected. This paper examines the kind of breaking through boundaries represented in the novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) by the Sudanese novelist Tayib Salih (1929-2009). In formal terms, his narrative hovers over several kinds of boundary: between realism and allegory, between autobiography and intertextuality, and between literal and figurative acts of translation. In terms of characterization, his protagonist crosses the literal border from his colonized South to the European North. He submits to, or undergoes, a kind of radical acculturation: that in itself crosses a border within him: between old and new ways of life, traditional or inherited and modern or acquired values. This process, in his somewhat unusual or extreme case, also breaks down the barriers that separate civility and being civilized from rapacity and barbarism. In dramatizing this process, Salih’s novel crosses over into the mode of a fable. This fable negotiates a crossing between a tale set in England and the Sudan and a fable in which a North African assumes and inverts the typologies and stereotypes associated with Shakespeare’s Othello and Caliban, or the antinomial relation between Europe and Africa set up in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Salih thus provides a fascinating reflection on a singular aspect of the condition of societies that were once colonized, and then find themselves moving or propelled towards what one might call a postcolonial condition, which is characterized by a dual compulsion. One aspect entails the desire to live within certain artificial psychic borders - either self-imposed, or foisted upon one set of people by another; its opposite entails the equally strong compulsion to break through such borders and boundaries.

II

One might say that Salih’s novel provides access to the interface between “colonial” and “modern” from a perspective that is the opposite of the one provided by Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The two fictional narratives stand at the same border, but view it from opposite sides.