

## Philippe Labro's American Dream

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It's January; outside, in the grey cement high school yard, the denuded trees are covered with frost.

I was sitting in the fifth row in English class. The teacher was analyzing a text when the door opened. Two men walked in, tritely dressed, bringing a whiff of chilly air that was already filtering through the windows of the poorly insulated old building. I forgot their names, age, faces, even their profession, but I do know, thirty years later, that their entry, that morning in our classroom, would be the origin of the first turning point of my life.

They had come to tell us about the possibility of receiving a one year scholarship to study in an American university. It was something unique, they said, in the middle of the background voices buzzing. Normally, the competition was only open to older students, with higher education. But that year, a few scholarships were still available, so they had decided to open the contest to high school students. That was a unique opportunity. I raised my hand.

A long time later, a big envelope arrived to my parents' house, for me. It was a blue kraft paper envelope, with a different texture, and in the upper left corner an emblem with a motto in Latin. In the right corner, two big colorful stamps, showing bright birds and strange plants. The weight of that envelope in my hands, its unusual format and unfamiliar color, made me guess, before I opened it, that it was carrying fabulous news. And then, just like in the dream I'd had so many times, I heard the call of the liner on which I would board a few months later to cruise towards the unknown. (Labro, *Foreign Student - L'étudiant étranger*, "Prologue")

The story begins in the mid-50s, when Philippe Labro initiates, as an exchange student, his first trip to America, an experience that will influence his personal and professional life, and will also inspire a series of novels that would leave a print in contemporary French literature.

Philippe Labro was born in Montauban, in Southern France, in 1936, and his childhood was marked by the Second World War. While part of his house was requisitioned by a German officer, his parents hid Jewish families. In 1948, his father brings the whole family back to Paris, to make sure the children would receive a good education. At age 15, Philippe wins a journalism contest and becomes editor of a youth magazine. A couple of years later, as he had failed the *baccalauréat* and was repeating his high school senior year, he obtained a Zellidja scholarship to study in Washington and Lee University, in Lexington, Virginia. As he narrates the experience in *L'étudiant étranger* (*The Foreign Student*, 1986), Labro remembers the impulse that made him raise his hand when two unknowns walked into the classroom to offer a scholarship to study in the United States, what he would call an “insatiable curiosity for America”, a passion nourished by childhood readings, movies, and personal encounters.

Back to France in 1957, Labro became a reporter for the radio station *Europe N°1*, then for the newspaper *France-Soir*. A couple of years later, at age 24, he published his first book, *Un Américain peu tranquille* (*An unquiet American*, 1960), a novelized biography of Al Capone that retells in first person the gangster's miserable childhood in Brooklyn, his installation in Chicago, his ascension in bootleg, drug trafficking and procurement, the gangs war to control sectors of the city, but also a more intimate aspect of Capone as a son, husband and father, until his reclusion in Alcatraz and dejected death in Miami. That surprising book, written in a fast, sober, direct style, with few metaphors and abundant slang - a style Labro himself defines, in the introduction, as inspired by the comic strips of the time -, let predict an attention-grabbing literary career. Unfortunately, the Algerian war interrupted Labro's activities, like many others', and led him to another trip, totally unplanned, which would

later inspire *Des feux mal éteints (Unextinguished fires)*, published in 1967 and adapted for the screen in 1994, a novel that recounts the story and dreams of all the young men who lost their innocence and often their life in what Dominique Paganelli would later define as “an absurd parenthesis”.

From that perspective, we can differentiate two lines in Labro’s production, one following chronologically his personal life from childhood to adulthood, and another one reproducing the sequences of his American adventure, which turns into some kind of initiatory journey. A quick glance at Labro’s life and writing highlights immediately the importance of the voyage motive, although most of the books were not produced in sequential order. It is also interesting to mention that in an interview recorded by Olivier Barrot in 2003 in a Parisian café, Le Rostand, he declared that about 50% of his “novels” were invented, using anecdotes, observations, testimonies and other persons’ experiences.

Labro’s “novelized autobiography” starts with *Le petit garçon (The Little Boy)* in 1992, bildungsroman or novel of formation that retells his childhood as the first stage of his psychological and cultural growth, with the powerful impact of World War II. Follows the chronicle of his adolescence, *Quinze ans (Fifteen Years Old)*, also published in 1992, in which he captures the emotions connected with the first love experience, a story that takes place in the early 50s, a time when teenage relationships had another dimension and sprang up with more violence, more emotion, yet more tenderness.

Then comes his first trip across the ocean, with *L’étudiant étranger (The Foreign Student, 1986)* and *Un été dans l’Ouest (A Summer in the West, 1988)*, two volumes describing America before the explosion of the 60s. In that context, Labro tries to “blend” into an unfamiliar context while he discovers the functioning of an American university, with its rules, extravagances and limits, as well as the social and racial relations governing a society that is sometimes not as free as it seems. He also discovers

the magic of traveling on those endless American roads, exhilarated by majestic landscapes and country music. The summer he spent in Colorado, working as a “field hand”, will add another dimension to that lesson of life.

The first part of Labro’s “American adventure”, that is to say, the crossing of the ocean on the Queen Mary, reappears years later in “Bye Bye Blackbird”, the first of the three stories making up *Le flûtiste invisible (The Invisible Flutist)*, published in 2013, also a story from a first-person perspective, but this time placed at the end of the forties, whose teller happens to be Labro’s reader. This produces a kind of *mise en abyme* since character and author are both, at a different time, narrator and protagonist:

I was one of the first students who obtained a one-year scholarship to study in an American university, on the East side, in Boston. Of course, I am not going to tell you what that kind of opportunity means. I read your books. I know you did the same thing. I don’t know what your crossing of the Atlantic was like, but mine was marked by an encounter that I still remember. (Labro, 2013, 21)

After that first American experience, and back in France in 1994, Labro starts working as a journalist, a period he describes in *Un début à Paris (Beginning in Paris)*. A couple of years later, after the interruption of the Algerian war, his career would bring him back to the United States, precisely to Yale University, where he was supposed to record a program for the French TV magazine *Cinq colonnes à la une*. Unexpectedly, he ended covering Kennedy’s assassination for the newspaper *France Soir*, and meeting Jack Ruby only a couple of days before he shot Lee Harvey Oswald. Later on, as a consequence of that incident, he would be auditioned by the Warren Commission. That incredible story inspired *On a tiré sur le Président (They Shot the President)*, published in 2013 for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of JFK’s death, a book with flashback effects, describing experiences that, chronologically, occurred barely ten years after Labro’s very first contact with America.

Meanwhile, in 1994, Philippe Labro found himself in a situation of imminent death with pharynx edema and acute respiratory disorder, and spent six weeks in the Cochin hospital in Paris, including ten days in intensive care after falling into a coma. He retells that episode with amazing meticulousness in *La Traversée (The Crossing)*, published in 1996: an “approach of death” – or “round-trip to death” as Labro named it in *Tomber sept fois, se relever huit* - haunted by the images of all the dead persons of his life, a nurse called Karen who apparently never existed in that unit of the hospital, and the obsessive image of the “Colorado blue pines”. After he recovered, still troubled by those chaotic visions, Labro decided to return to Colorado, in order to find some of the figures who had crossed his delirium, and to check if the pine skyline he had watched coming closer while travelling from Virginia to Colorado in the 50s, was really as powerfully blue as the one that he had discerned in his coma. From that journey arose the book *Rendez-vous au Colorado (Rendez-vous in Colorado)* in 1997, where Labro defines himself, in some kind of monologue, as a “blue color digger”:

You started climbing without knowing what the exploration would reveal. Later you will wonder if the search and the direction were more important than the goal itself. But sit down for a minute. You are in the forest, but in a specific spot, on the ridge from where you can free yourself and your eyes travel. You are surrounded by trees, and from your spot you can see thousands of other trees, and you can finally compare that green and blue flow with the green and blue ocean of your nights of hallucination and sickness. (Labro. 1997, 200-201)

That contemplation would culminate in a simple statement: what he saw then was more beautiful than what he had expected, and he understood that while he was close to death on his hospital bed, the image of the Uncompahgre Forest had in fact helped him “keep some hope to find the end of the tunnel”. (Labro. 1997, 202)

At this point, if we “reorganize” the bibliographic chronology, following Labro’s life story, we reach the following sequence: *The Little Boy* (1990); *Fifteen Years Old* (1992); *The Foreign Student* (1986); *A Summer in the West* (1988), *Beginning in Paris* (1997); *Unextinguished fires* (1967); *They Shot the President* (2013); *The Crossing* (1996) and *Rendez-vous in Colorado* (1997). To those novels, we would add two works belonging to different genres yet centered on similar themes: *The Invisible Flutist*, in 2013, already mentioned for presenting the same initiation trip related by a different narrator, and *Mon Amérique, 50 portraits de légende (My America, 50 legendary portraits)* in 2012, that Labro defines as a tribute to his second homeland, in form of 50 “profiles”, 50 characters without any common point between them, except that they were part of his “American dream”. In an interview published in *Paris Match* by Olivier Royant, Labro explains that those characters’ come

From nowhere. Most of them are immigrants. Jews running away from Nazism. Black people fighting for their civic rights. All are inventors. They created bases, in music, cinema, literature or politics that influenced us. Only in America could appear such kinds of destinies.

In the same interview, Labro said he would have loved to meet Marilyn Monroe “because she was a self-taught woman. People think she is a little blonde whore, useless and stupid, while she is intelligent, serious and tragic”, and Albert Einstein “not only because he was a genius but also for his sense of humor, his wisdom and his craziness”. And when asked about his most valuable encounters, he recalled the two professors of journalism he met at the university: “They both gave me a taste for writing. They changed my life.” (Royan)

But if we set aside that last book, we can clearly perceive two intertwining sequences: one is strictly chronological and reproduces the individual growing, from childhood to adulthood, the formation as a journalist, the experience of war, the professional maturing, the proximity of death and the new stage, with a fresh

perspective; the other follows the stages of the American journey, the dreams fermenting from childhood, the first crossing of the ocean and initiation to manhood, the second crossing a few years later and the crazy coincidence that turns him into a grown-up reporter. Those two sequences crash against each other with what we would call the “third” crossing, the coma haunted by the obsessive image of “Colorado blue pine” which finally converts into Labro’s life jacket. The actual return to the American West will come full circle.

In those two sequences, most of the books we referred to could be defined as autobiographic. The autobiography has marked literature, in one form or another, since Antique times, changing title and procedure according to their authors. St. Augustine, Rousseau and Umberto Eco called them *Confessions*, Montaigne *Essays*, Chateaubriand *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*, and Dostoyevsky *Writer Diary*. Others invented more elusive titles, from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* to Laura Ingalls' *Little House on the Prairie*, Mario Vargas Llosa's *A Fish in the Water*, Saint-Exupéry's *Flight to Arras*, and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. But even the most imaginative and visionary fiction includes some autobiographic elements, and many authors who illustrated themselves in other genres also wrote their autobiography.

Labro’s novels can also be related to the travel literature group, which also embraces a significant amount of life experience, yet doesn’t use the journey pattern as a mere “back-drop”. In fact, it is an expression of the author’s progress and evolution as a result of the journey itself: climbing a mountain, crossing an ocean, discovering new geographical and human realities are directly related to one’s own growth. Logically, the writers who stand out in this genre are often travelers, missionaries, explorers, educators or scientists, because of the very nature of their profession or vocation, and their creation has a lot in common with essay writing. Journalists – such as Philippe Labro - show distinctive qualities, proper to their profession; their purpose is not limited to immortalizing facts, it aims for the transmission of contents: straight, precise, distinctive, and therefore impacting. Even the most “fictionalized” story follows the

basic “ABCD” principles (Accuracy, Brevity, Conciseness and Directness), and the “5 W and 1 H” (What, Who, When, Where, Why and How) taught in any beginning journalism course and applied by professionals.

Besides, Labro’s novels fit into a tendency developed in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, consisting in the recognition of travel chronicle and travel inspired fiction as a literary production per se. As Adams (1983) states, in the mid-1970s, critics such as Michel Butor, Germaine Brée and Donald Keene started referring to the voyage as a literary genre. From that time, the analysis stops focusing exclusively on the traveling itself and gives more importance to the psychological, intellectual and/or spiritual experience that combines the discovery of a new reality with self-encounter (Adams, 37-38). As a matter of fact, Butor, urged the development of a science called *Iterology*, which analyzes the human moves and their relation with the text, stating that “writing is a voyage and the voyage is writing”. Butor also mentioned that he was always writing a journal while traveling, but with a gap between the experience he was living at that moment and the one he was writing about: “I need my trips to travel”, he said. (Butor 4-19)

In Labro’s production, precisely in the volumes we are referring to, autobiography and traveling are closely connected, since the journey is the base of his “growing experience”, and can be related to what Carl Jung defines as “the search for an exterior psychic place” (Jung, chapter IX). The craving for traveling expresses then the unconscious desire to find a part of the individual’s personality that became invisible under the influence of his daily context. If the experience is sufficiently powerful, it will provoke at some point a need to come back (like Labro’s trip to Colorado after his illness), to find those hidden parts of the personality.

Therefore, the traveling episode blends with the individual’s initiation. In Labro’s case, the journeys, especially the one related to an “approach to death” situation,



are also part of the hero's process. According to Isoldi, such process is divided in five steps: the "waking up" or call to adventure that marks the beginning of the route; the crossing of the first threshold that takes the hero to the unknown space and changes all his landmarks and points of reference; the death and resurrection, when the hero is "swallowed" by the unknown and reaches a new level of consciousness; the initiation rite to overcome the weaknesses; and the road back home, with a knowledge and wisdom that couldn't have been obtained without the journey. (Isoldi 99-102). At that point, the hero can choose to continue traveling or to return home, but he would be marked by the episode that transformed him and redefined his life perspective.

Labro's novels definitely follow the pattern of an initiatory journey, and although they have been written years after the actual traveling that inspired them, they often come close to the journal format, for the sharpness of the descriptions and the accurate selection of details, a style which could even lead us to believe that parts are not just reconstructions based on memories – or fiction like Labro claims -, but maybe fragments written during the journey, as a professional reflex so to speak. Yet, with his outstanding storyteller's skill, he mixes times, places and perspectives, escaping from the yoke of chronology and turning his "telling of a story" into an artistic creation. As Stephen Shapiro explains, the process acquires then a new breadth:

Is autobiography a slave to chronology? If the answer were yes, then autobiography would have no possible claim to being an art form, for the essential characteristic of art is the freedom to play with facts in such a way that details and data become symbols, patterns that illuminate our own experience. (...) Autobiography is primarily an art of perspective, an art of juxtaposed perspectives: the present commenting upon the past, the past commenting upon the present. It is an art of contrast and integration. (436-37)

About 60 years have passed since Philippe Labro's first trip to America, and repeatedly reporters and critics ask him why he never left Paris to settle in the United



States, and repeatedly he answers that the idea crossed his mind a couple of times, but that he preferred to maintain the perspective, the possibility of seeing things from the distance. The remoteness gives an acuter perception of the reality and a better understanding of the other country's strengths, weaknesses and contradictions. If Labro's novels are based on his own experience, they are also marked by the magic of the writing process, which turned at least part of the life story into fiction and converted the Colorado pines into a green and blue ocean.

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