

## Roman Landscapes in William Demby's *The Catacombs*, and *King Comus*

### Rome's Gritty Life

Reading William Demby's *The Catacombs* (1965) and *King Comus* (2017) as Roman novels makes clear the role the Ancient City took on in his oeuvre. Published more than fifty years apart, they offer complementary views of the Roman milieu that help situate them alongside other Rome-based works of American expatriate fiction. While the plot of *The Catacombs* builds on the alternation between a fictional narration that takes place against the background of its 1960s present, fragments of the author's personal experience, and flashes of contemporary, international dramatic events, it is the Ancient City that slowly becomes the real protagonist of the novel. In *King Comus*, more than in his first Roman novel, Demby's extravagant imagination succeeds in turning that setting into a spectacular metaphor for an ambiguous, end-of-millennium paradise where all sorts of paradoxes can be readily accommodated.

In a lengthy 2008 interview, William Demby recalled his decision to make Rome the place of his artistic debut early in the post-World War II period, when, a fresh graduate from Fisk University on the G.I. Bill, he left the US on a ship bound to Italy:

It was 1947, and this time I was on my way back to Europe to become an artist. I took the train from Naples and went to Rome, where I was going to start life. I had only one suitcase with me, filled with snappy new artist clothes. For some mysterious reason, the smart-ass urban sophistication of Paris never appealed to me, I was bent on going to Rome from day one! I had been there during the war, I could even speak a smattering of Italian.... It was a good thing I went there because Rome had become the most important place to be in those years. Paris

was all right, but to my mind it was for art and literary poseurs while Rome was for the gritty life of the pure artist as depicted in Roberto Rossellini's films!<sup>1</sup>

It was a good thing indeed, and not for Demby alone, who quickly became part of the exciting intellectual climate of those regenerative years, but also for Rome, which had seldom – if ever – seen an aspiring African American artist before. Unlike Paris,<sup>2</sup> at that time Rome could not boast any familiarity whatever with African American culture, exception made for a few groups of young jazz enthusiasts who did their best to enliven with their music the drowsy, pre-Dolce Vita Roman night life. On its part, the city managed to pay back Demby's appreciation with a warm, intellectually stimulating hospitality, to start with a casual encounter that, right upon his arrival, was to determine the course of events. This is how in later years Demby himself, with his usual spontaneity, recalled that fortunate incident:

When I landed in Rome, I had nowhere to go, then suddenly this guy that had been on the train with me said: 'Come with me...' and the first thing I know we are living in an artist commune in Via San Teodoro.... Now, these are the first days after the war and suddenly I had an enormous group of friends, including Bruno Zevi, Renzo Vespignani and his wife Graziella, Citto Maselli, then friend and assistant of Michelangelo Antonioni. (qtd. in Micconi 126)

That group of emerging intellectuals in Rome was made of artists and architects, art critics and filmmakers, and a variety of factotums in the movie industry. Particularly conspicuous was the presence of young painters on their way to celebrity, like Mimmo Rotella and Francesco Lo Savio, Alberto Burri, Afro, and Mario Schifano, plus that of Renzo Vespignani, already a prominent name of the so-called new realist avant-garde. The rough, genuine nature of the postwar Roman milieu—nothing to be compared with Paris's sophistication—together with the vivacious personalities within this group

would prove a perfect combination for Demby's personal and artistic growth as a literary apprentice. But what really impressed him the most since the beginning of his sojourn was the strong political engagement of his friends who, like most of the Italian avant-garde artists of the time, were outspoken supporters and militants of the Socialist and Communist Parties.

In the politically heated postwar climate in which Demby settled, it was practically impossible to find an artist lacking a strong ideological belief; during the years immediately following World War II, as Italy was trying to recover from twenty years of Fascist regime, and from a long, disastrous armed conflict, the influence of the left was particularly strong and visible. Consequently, the ideological commitment of the followers of the left's two major parties was an important component of daily life, as well as was the artists' professional practice. After all, at the first democratic elections held soon after the war, in 1946, the Socialists and Communists Parties could together count on a massive share of the popular vote that neared forty per cent of the voting population. Given this fact, a consistent part of Demby's training as a young writer turned out to be an enriching, firsthand experience in political argumentation with his artist friends, the great majority of whom happened to be of a leftist inclination. As he would recall more than half a century later, "There was a cult of the left that everyone wanted to embrace.... And what constituted being serious now was the culture of the left" (qtd. in Micconi 127). From a cultural and social standpoint, the Italian situation at the time was certainly very distant from that he had experienced in the United States, and for Demby living in Rome inevitably meant going through a gradual distancing from his native environment.

As it often happens with expatriate artists who begin their careers abroad, this is the time they begin to reflect on what they have left behind—landscapes and daily habits that were once familiar, old emotions and friends now objectively distant. It is

even more so for writers, for whom language itself represents a matter of vital importance; in this Demby was no exception, as the early years of his Roman stay were largely devoted to the writing of his first novel *Beetlecreek* (1950), which appeared when the author was still in his twenties. Entirely set in a provincial West Virginia town, the novel, is by his own admission the most intensely American among his fictions, and the closest to his “moral universe”: “*Beetlecreek* has a lot of that in it. I wrote the novel while I was in foreign cities ... and suddenly it all came together in a palace in Venice; and the first thing I know is that I had finished a novel.” (qtd. in Micconi 131) Interestingly, Demby’s novel was quickly translated into Italian, and published, under the title *Festa a Beetlecreek*,<sup>3</sup> by the major house Mondadori in that same year—an unusually short time for any translation to appear in those years, let alone for a newcomer as Demby was at the time. For the young writer, the Roman atmosphere must have been not only stimulating, but also receptive, and the influence of that new milieu tuned out to be highly beneficial, especially given that he apparently suffered no major shock, whether cultural, racial, or even simply linguistic. Demby’s marriage - in 1953 - to Lucia Drudi, a young Tuscan writer, proto-feminist intellectual, translator and scriptwriter, implicitly confirmed that Demby’s *affair* with the Italian intelligentsia had not been a mere episode.

His involvement with the Italian artistic community in the most challenging, but also most stimulating period of post-war reconstruction, his debut as a novelist, and his immersion in a foreign country that still largely ignored the meaning of African American cultural heritage, coalesced in producing that unique formative experience that contributed Demby’s later fiction its unusual cosmopolitan touch, and formal originality. No less important in those years was the beginning of a long-lasting collaboration as a correspondent for several Italian newspapers and magazines, among them major weeklies like *Epoca* and *L’Espresso*. Besides ensuring a consistent income,

this activity significantly helped Demby expand his network of domestic and international contacts, in both Europe and Africa.

And then, of course, there was cinema—not yet the big commercial productions that in later years would make Cinecittà a world-renowned studio, but the poor, intense, black and white films shot in the still devastated Italian cities of the late 1940s and early 1950s. It was a time dominated by directors like Rossellini, De Sica, Visconti, Antonioni, and a still very young Fellini, whose peculiar neorealism was already brightened by flashes of visionary imagination. Demby's association with the Italian cinema of the early Fifties was a crucial episode of his intense working career, as he coupled his main activity as a translator of Italian dialogues into English with that of script-writer, and occasionally also of assistant to the director. In 1951, the producers of Roberto Rossellini's *Europa '51*, offered him a position as dialogue assistant, which gave him the possibility to collaborate with one of the top directors of the time, during a particularly delicate stretch of his career. Drawn from an original story by Federico Fellini, the movie starred as the Swedish actress Ingrid Bergman, with whom Rossellini was in the process of establishing a love affair, the developments of which would resonate for years in the Italian popular press. That way, a thirty-year-old Demby had a close brush with mundanity as the couple Bergman-Rossellini, when the movie was released in 1952, was still at the center of a major scandal, with long repercussions that extended also to the US. That same year, Demby was also offered a prominent role as an actor in *Anna's Sin*, a melodramatic B-movie, expertly directed by Camillo Mastrocinque<sup>4</sup>. While not a major success, the film nevertheless well represented stereotypes of Italian culture of the period as to social restrictions and especially interracial relationships. Although praised by some critics, Demby's performance as an actor would remain his only experience in that area.

If translating someone else's scripts (often overnight) had become one of Demby's main sources of income for more than a decade, that intense and often mechanical activity would prove draining and ultimately alienating. Having become a writer early in his life, he aspired to be considered as such but, as he would admit years later, "I had ... lost all control over any ideas I had about the nature of literature ... my mind was always filled with the imagination of other people." (qtd. by Micconi 133) Although it was a difficult choice to make after more than a decade of absence from the literary scene, by the early 1960s Demby had decided to give himself another chance as a creative writer.

### ***The Catacombs: Rome as a Christian Cemetery***

*The Catacombs*<sup>5</sup>, the novel that in 1965 marked Demby's official return to letters, was set in Rome, where he still lived, and the labyrinthine underground system of the city represents its most dramatic setting. Rome also plays an important role in *King Comus*<sup>6</sup> (completed 2007; published posthumously in 2017), Demby's final narrative production; between the two works, however, there is a long span of time of more than forty years. As it turned out, the writing of *The Catacombs* was for Demby an experience of liberation of both intellectual and artistic energies at a time in which another type of liberation, one from European colonialism, was still being pursued by a number of African nations. Living in Rome, meant being practically next door to the countries of Mediterranean Africa, which, like Algeria with France, were still engaged in bloody conflicts. As both as an artist of African descent, and a politically aware intellectual, Demby could not possibly ignore the fact that just a few hundred miles from the Italian coastline those African peoples were still fighting for their liberation. Inevitably, the writer's conscience kept registering fragmented echoes of that plight, as

did his semiautobiographical narrator—and eventually both proceeded to incorporate them in their fictional accounts in progress.

*The Catacombs*, to be sure, doesn't openly dramatize political, or racial conflicts in realistic terms. What it does, however, is insinuate obliquely the constant presence of an undeclared power conflict between the two protagonists – an African American woman, and a white European man – through the voice of a voyeuristic narrator, himself a not-entirely disinterested observer. As Ewa Luczack has pointed out, the love affair between Doris and Rafael (most often referred to as "the Count") is heavily unbalanced: "In a somewhat predictable manner, the count's wealth and abundance debilitate his vitality and energy; he suffers from melancholia, passivity, and impotence. It is Doris, an African American dancer and budding actress that invigorates him psychologically and sexually..."<sup>7</sup>. Nonetheless, as an aristocrat, he behaves as if he were in total charge of their menage and is oblivious to the fact that his romance with Doris, quite clearly destined to a final failure, proceeds in boredom and reciprocal discontent, in a vaguely existentialist, privately disenchanting atmosphere. The public frame of the plot, by contrast, is chronicled, till the open-ended conclusion of the novel, in a modernistic, highly disruptive fashion, among frequent interruptions, abrupt shifts in time and space, and flashes of international news whose common denominator seems to be impending disaster.<sup>8</sup> This intruding mass of disparate material includes headlines and news dispatches on the escalation of the Algerian War of Independence, reports on President Kennedy's State visit to Rome shortly before his assassination, the deaths of Marilyn Monroe, and of Pope John XXIII, fragments of stories about violent racial clashes in Mississippi, and the Cuban nuclear missiles crisis. Mixed with other bits of disordered information, this assortment of factual fragments ends up by providing an objective, vivacious context to the lifeless ménage of the two main characters, a public

counterpoint that complements, and contrasts, the exhausted private relationship of the two protagonists.

Demby's intent in using this technique seems to be twofold, in that it allows his narrator to build up a recognizably contemporary, if chaotic, framework for his story, while at the same time establishing a connection of simultaneity between the time of writing and the time of action. At a textual level, that reinforces the illusion of being in a continuous present—not only does the novel proceed through the first-person account of a narrator who bears the same name as the author, but, just like him, he too is intent on writing a novel that is largely based on his own experience. The ambiguous correspondence established between the homodiegetic narrator and the author himself reinforces the sensation that Demby is drawing a number of significant particulars from his own biography, as for example when he has the narrator comment upon an episode that had actually happened to the author in the recent past:

“... at the Writers’ Congress in Florence I talked about (my novel) freely with anyone who was willing to listen. One novelist even began to criticize the novel as though it had already been written, which is perfectly in harmony with the theory of cubistic time I am so recklessly fooling around with.” (*Catacombs* 39-40)

A revealing illustration of the deeply self-reflexive nature of Demby's narrative, this paradigmatic *mise en abyme*<sup>9</sup> of the novel calls explicitly attention upon a central component of technique that he struggled with for the first time while writing *The Catacombs*. In fact, the notion of cubistic time – that is of a sequence of "now" simultaneously displayed one next to the other along a horizontal plane – tends to disrupt both the idea of a linear chronology (that is of a past, present, and future) and that of hierarchy (or the different values of people, things, episodes, etc.). Demby's use of this technique – whose origin goes back to the early days of modernism, when Gertrude Stein made her first literary experiments<sup>10</sup> – allows him to further extend the



relevance of simultaneity by weaving into his narrative a pattern made of tight intertextual allusions.

While the plot of *The Catacombs* keeps building on the alternance between a fictional narration that takes place against the background of contemporary Rome, fragments of the author's personal experience, and also of actual events occurring contemporaneously elsewhere in the world, it is the ancient, *literary* city that slowly becomes the real protagonist of the novel. Its archeological ruins, in particular, have traditionally attracted the attention of a number of writers, including prominent American novelists like Herman Melville and Henry James, Mark Twain and Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose last novel, *The Marble Faun* (1860), is set entirely in a somber and eerie mid-nineteenth-century Rome. In an early scene of that gothic romance – and Demby's story has indeed more than a vague gothic inclination of its own – Miriam gets lost in the Roman Catacombs—an episode that might have inspired the ambiguous epilogue of Demby's novel, in which Doris, ends up being swallowed down by that same early Christian cemetery.<sup>11</sup> More than a century after its publication, *The Marble Faun's* gothic scenery made of gloomy crypts, dark churches, and ruined underground alleys is revived in Demby's original use of his novel's Roman background. By virtue of the intertextual continuity he manages to establish between his own representation of the eternal city's Catacombs, and that – equally disturbing – employed by his predecessor, Demby succeeds in giving a tangible illustration of his abstract notion of cubistic time's *continuous present*.

This form of dialogism embraces the present of Demby's novel and Hawthorne's mid-Nineteenth Century dark romance, extending into the past to the early-Christian origins of that subterranean structure, thus retracing and emphasizing the cultural value accumulated by the catacombs through history. Consequently, the central elements of the novel's spatial and temporal structures, are each ingrained in the other. Back in 1930,

Mikhail Bakhtin first identified and defined the phenomenon of such blending of temporal and spatial structures as a *chronotope*:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.<sup>12</sup>

Demby's awareness of the relevance of Bakhtin's notion seems to surface in various parts of his novel, but nowhere more plainly as in this passage, concerning Pope John XXIII's funeral, in which the narrator alludes literally to "the deceptive time-space dimensions of this *chiesa* (*church*) which is Rome."<sup>13</sup> (*Catacombs* 138)

Deceptive indeed is the way in which Demby employs the "concrete whole" of the Catacombs to deepen the dialogic impact of his intertextual discourse, while strengthening the effect of simultaneity he had already explored when experimenting with his idea of the *continuous present*. Quite literally, the catacombs are a vast, intricate, multi-layered cemeterial area which early Christians used as a means of escape imperial persecution. The place, whose origins date back to the end of the second Century CE, is so deeply rooted in Roman soil and history as to be still identified not only as the locus of the Western Christian tradition but also from which it was able to survive. In that respect, it would have been very difficult to make time so fully visible had Demby chosen a different location for his novel's central focus, for still in the present the catacombs are no mere relic of the past, but – somehow ironically for a cemetery – a rather animated area, and a sacred *lieu de memoir*. Quite unexpectedly, given the fact that Demby could have not come across Bakhtin's theories before writing his novel, the notion of the chronotope thus seems to be the most apt critical instrument with which to

gain fuller appreciation of a novel like *The Catacombs*, and consequently to give Demby's *reckless* experiments with cubistic time the credit they deserve.

If Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* and James's *Daisy Miller*, and *The Portrait of a Lady* – both extensively set in Nineteenth Century Rome – are among the most obvious intertextual references that come to mind in reading *The Catacombs*, echoes of other novels keep lingering in several episodes of Demby's narrative.<sup>14</sup> Obviously, the one story that looms in its background with insistence is that of *Antony and Cleopatra*, as the narrator makes explicit reference to it in various parts of his narrative, since his female protagonist, Doris, happens to be playing "one of Elizabeth Taylor's handmaidens in Twentieth Century-Fox's *Cleopatra* colossal now being filmed in Rome." (*Catacombs* 13) The narrator's detailed mention of this episode appears to be consonant with Demby's conviction, excerpted from a passage of his interview with Giovanna Micconi, that "much of what *The Catacombs* is, is reporting ... a recording of 1960's events." (qtd. by Micconi 136) Demby's contention concerning the substantially realistic nature of his novel, however, describes only part of his intent, leaving off several important aspects of his writing that his alleged realism subtly conceals. Among these components, the discourse on the opposition between the grandeur of the past and the paucity of the present that Demby carries on unassumingly throughout his novel. At times, that discourse is conveyed through parody, as in episodes concerning the film *Cleopatra* that was actually being shot in Rome between 1962 and 1963, under the direction of Joseph Mankiewicz. Demby's familiarity with the world of the Roman film industry allowed him to know that, though sold as a reduction of the Shakespearean tragedy, the main source of inspiration for the script of the movie was *The Life and Times of Cleopatra*, a novel by Italian author Carlo Maria Franzero<sup>15</sup> that had been translated into English in 1957. This fact gives Demby the opportunity to introduce a parodistic component in the dramatization of the contrast between the tragic intensity of

the old Shakespearean drama and its degraded, contemporary movie adaptation, in which the mythical queen of ancient Egypt is turned into a glamorous icon of mass consumption. Imperial Rome, in turn, has ended up becoming a debauched, modern commercial city, while Doris's affair with a ludicrous distortion of an Italian aristocrat, and her occasional escapades with the voyeuristic narrator, amount to a cheap mimicry of Cleopatra's dramatic love stories with Antony and Caesar. In the prolonged opposition between a majestic past made of regal memories and a non-descript, early 1960s version of Rome, Doris appears to be increasingly like a caricature of the protagonist of the Shakespearean drama. Although her intoxicating beauty may at first suggest a superficial correspondence between the two, nonetheless the appearance of the young actress betrays a remarkable tastelessness, an aspect upon which the irony of the narrator cannot refrain from insisting, while apparently commenting on the general falseness of her stage makeup and costume:

(though on several occasions I have tried to persuade her (Doris) not to, she insists on wearing the grotesquely exotic – but I must admit, for her, strangely appropriate – make-up she wears before the cameras; her hairdo, too, is authentically ancient Egyptian—a back-leaning cone which somehow makes me think of a black lacquered cone of spider webs, a magical fertility symbol floating detachedly over the masklike beauty of her enchanted, nut brown monkey-face...). (*Catacombs* 13)

The ironic distance the narrator employs towards the two main characters of his plot becomes even more explicit, and at the same time more ambiguous, as he starts portraying both according to the most traditional stereotypes—Doris as an icon of primitive fertility, as opposed to the Count, the sterile old-world aristocrat. So thoroughly predictable are the distinctive traits of each of the two that one is tempted to

interpret their performance as part of a pantomime—incidentally a popular genre in ancient Rome—played against a scenery made of old ruins, in which nothing seems to be authentic. Moreover, as Sara Marzioli points out, "The narrator clearly connects his view of Doris to traditional cultural narratives of blackness. It is not by chance that, as the embodiment of black history in the text, she has to 'put on her best African queen act' in order to socialize at the first party she attends in Rome."<sup>16</sup> Doris is silently asked to interpret at best the "African queen"; she is expected by the Roman audience to be sensual, mysterious, spontaneous, as contemplated by these stereotype. And that is also the main reason why she is in conflict with the city of Rome, which she judges as an unreal, immense cemetery, a hostile space that keeps expecting her to perform her exotic role, while draining her of her vitality. No wonder she reacts by being provocative, occasionally rude in her comments on the ruins of ancient Rome, (catacombs included) that to her appear singularly devoid of any cultural or artistic relevance—just what the implied audience expect from her. What she grasps seems to be no more than the face value of things or, in the case of the Catacombs, a place whose main function is to keep the bodies of the dead. As she tells the Count, "What I mean is—if you really had to take me sightseeing—and the good Lord knows I have enough sightseeing to my credit to have earned at least five Mortician degrees—why bring me to the Catacombs? Isn't there anything else to see in Rome except churches and tombs?" (*Catacombs* 17) Is not that naiveté supposed to be her part in the play?

### ***King Comus: Rome as a pagan metropolis***

A chaotic explosion of subterranean coincidences is what confronts the readers as the opening page of *King Comus* unfolds before their eyes. This blatant exhibition of highly contradictory signs and subtle, mostly half-formed nuances suggest from the outset that the notion of cultural syncretism can provide a viable interpretive key for

both of William Demby's "Roman" novels. Perhaps the first feature to catch the eye is the long parenthetical, rambling, opening passage that runs for the entire first page of *King Comus*—something suspended between Tristram Shandy's narrative funambulism and Reverend Cherrycoke's logorrhea in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*. As reading proceeds, however, the narrative models that come to mind as possible sources of inspiration are William Faulkner's modernist experiments with unstable points of view, time shifts, and structural fragmentation and, quite inevitably, Ishmael Reed's inspiring, black counter-history, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). However, as the editor of *King Comus*, Melanie Masterton Sherazi contends in her "Note on the Text", the novel is a sustained effort to revive creatively some of the narrative techniques – such as cubistic time and multiple plots – with which he had experimented extensively in *The Catacombs*. By extending considerably the timespan of his plot, he can create a narrative that:

... is composed of three interrelated timeframes: an early nineteenth-century plotline follows the experiences of the titular King Comus, a virtuoso musician and escaped slave ...; a World War II plotline directly engages Demby's wartime experiences ...; and a turn of the twenty-first century plotline recounts the reunion ... (of the three old war mates) ... and their efforts to organize a global gospel music summit in Rome. <sup>17</sup>

Considering that this last segment completing the narration is set entirely in Rome, my comments will address mainly the third and final part of the novel, whose central event appears to me crucial to clarify Demby's discourse on the *sense* of the city, and ultimately his own long and complex relationship with the cultural atmosphere that serves as a background for his hectic plots, and their uncanny coincidences.

Parallel to the development of the plotlines, runs a fragmented, subtextual reflection on the nature of the different types of historical narrations that Demby employs also as self-reflexive device to call attention to the composite nature of his own novel.<sup>18</sup> His unorthodox strategy of rendering historical accounts out of their order is mirrored by Rome's haphazard scenery, the same that, years earlier, had already proven successful in *The Catacombs*. The city's multi-layered soil, a peculiar feature that open excavations of its stratified underground have made easily visible, represents the "topographic memory"<sup>19</sup> of the place, a formula that sums up both the syncretic nature of ancient Rome, and the approach archaeologists have been effectively developing since the 1930's. Perhaps due to his long familiarity with Rome, Demby seems in his last novel to have adopted a method to reconstruct the memory of African Americans and of his own past that seems inspired by the archaeologists' techniques. Largely based on conservation and restoration of the ancient, stratified remains Demby's practical use of cultural syncretism, grounded in the assimilation of differences, might have easily been inspired by the visible results of contemporary excavations in various parts of central Rome. In *King Comus*, different plots, places, periods of time, and cultural components are churn together toward a strangely coherent blend. The tradition of ancient Romans of appropriating, rather than destroying the material goods and intellectual achievements of conquered peoples, even when the spoils did not conform to the principles and habits of the victors, has been recognized as a truly enriching resource.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, recollections by Demby's friends and family members seem to emphasize his attraction for the flexibility of ancient Rome's cultural milieu as well as his admiration for Latin literature. Since each of these has been indicated as a possible source for his experiments in the integration of writing with painting, it does not seem illogical to conclude that Demby's experiments in writing moved in a direction

substantially similar to that followed by ancient Roman practitioners,<sup>21</sup> and successfully rediscovered by modern archaeology.

A parallel sense of open-mindedness was also exhibited by several Roman emperors in delicate matters related to the handling of religious concerns and cult practices<sup>22</sup>, as various developments of local architecture throughout the entire course of the Empire well document. Particularly convincing in this respect is the evidence offered by the remnants of most pagan temples' conversion into Christian churches in virtually all parts of the imperial domain. Ironically, that custom became mostly noticeable in the ancient capital of the pagan empire, as old Rome gradually gained importance as the recognized seat of Christianity. Over the centuries, that practice has undeniably grown into a sign of the singularity of Rome, of its cultural atmosphere, and even of some typical attitudes of its population. The character of the city helped stimulating the curiosity of its adopted son William Demby, who, while writing much of *King Comus* in the United States, eventually rediscovered the ultimate sense of his by then remote but still deeply rooted Roman years. The ambitious general structure of the novel reflects the variety of intellectual influences Demby was able to assume since the early days of his time in Rome, just as the continuous crisscrossing of its plotlines mirrors the unique, remarkable blending of the city's pagan origins with its more modern Christian, and Catholic traditions.

Nowhere does this appear more clearly than in the final section of his novel, consisting of "five movements and a coda," all focused on the organization of a three-day festival of Black American and International gospel music, denominated the "Gospel Summit"—an extraordinary open-air event, to be held in Rome:

The project everybody in Rome was talking about, the "Talk of the Town" so to speak, was of course Joe Stabat's "Gospel Summit" now widely advertised as a "three-day festival of Black American and International Gospel Music to be sung



by a great variety of Gospel Choral Ensembles from all over the world," and scheduled to take place in two weeks' time but at a site yet to be announced by the competent authorities within the Italian government apparatus, even though at least twenty-eight gospel choirs or choral groups had already confirmed their participation and time of arrival. (*King Comus* 132)

A city like Rome, with its "atmosphere of poisonous medieval intrigue" (*King Comus* 134), could certainly provide the most appropriate stage for a colossal business event that is going to be "sanctified" by "a huge Gospel Summit Cross" studded with ten million dollars' worth of diamonds coming straight from Africa. After all, as accurately chronicled in *The Catacombs*, the city had already proven a perfect background for lavish events, as in the case of the film *Cleopatra*. In *King Comus*, more so than in his first Roman novel, Demby's extravagant imagination succeeds in turning that setting into a spectacular metaphor for an ambiguous paradise in which all sorts of paradoxes can readily be accommodated. Thus, in an ironic and not entirely unrealistic rendering of the happy-go-lucky, slightly sadistic, bureaucratic rituals of Rome's "competent authorities," the narrator is ready to expose the paradoxical attitudes of the administrators, whose knowledge of the city's Paleo-Christian history is practically nil:

In fact just this morning the site originally assigned the "late Gospel Summit Project"...a vast park-like meadow six kilometers north-west of the spot historians say Constantine I experienced his "Dream-Vision of the Cross" had unceremoniously been taken off the bargaining table...because suddenly it had been discovered (again just that morning) that that particularly lovely patch of meadowland several kilometers north of the Milvio Bridge had been set aside as

the hallowed site for a monument to the military dead of the Iraq War.<sup>23</sup> (*King Comus* 133)

By referring to Constantine I, traditionally considered a champion of the coalescence of pagan and Christian believers—the legend has it that shortly before the battle Constantine was blessed by a vision in the sky of the Holy Cross—Demby's discourse on the assimilation of differences becomes itself an object of his irony. That seemingly casual allusion to a well-known historical episode of the year 312 CE confirms the impression that D.—the narrator who seems to share many qualities with the author, beginning with their common fondness for writing—is the main instrument in the occasional voicing of Demby's invisible mind. His indulgent attitude towards that pagan crossroads of different civilizations and languages, religions, and global business, for example, reflects the author's recognition and sincere appreciation of Rome's deeply unorthodox nature—an aspect that had already surfaced in *The Catacombs*. Where else could such an event, "so exquisitely non-Catholic," be organized but in the "Catholic city par-excellence" (*King Comus* 134) that is Rome? Open to international operators in all kinds of business – whether related to religious practices, or to the prosperous underworld – Demby's Eternal City is closely reminiscent of Fellini's fantastic visions<sup>24</sup> in which it becomes impossible to draw the line between the city's spiritual and secular attitudes. In the final pages of *King Comus*, then, as an atmosphere of frantic uncertainty about a possible cancellation of the Gospel Summit takes hold of the city's decision-making centers, the abruptness of shifts in subject and time introduced by the narrator contributes to make the general chaos even more palpable.

In this crucial segment of the novel, the author displays a remarkable ability in bringing together characters, stories and modes, old and new, and combining them in a concentrated run-on paragraph a dozen pages long, dominated by the spirit of satire.<sup>25</sup>

As a matter of fact, the idea of cashing in on "God-spell", or "The Good News", in an old abandoned military airport lot of the historic center of Christianity, under a gigantic cross turned into an icon of wanton luxury, is a fairly potent way of denouncing the overwhelming control of practically all forms of contemporary expression exercised by the gospel of money. Inevitably contaminated by the openly commercial character of the enterprise, the international gathering is preceded by a long dispute between various and presumably corrupt government agencies, and the organizers, Joe Stabat Inc., which is headed by an ex-Wall Street insider. Once more, the pagan roots of Christianity—that singular blend of apparently conflicting interests and aspirations whose dynamics Demby had occasion to see at work and assimilate during his years in Rome—are brilliantly reunited in this hectic conclusion in which the sacred and the profane go happily hand-in-hand under the Roman sky. Inevitably, one is led to conclude that the striking contrast between the originally religious nature of gospel songs and the degraded atmosphere of the place selected to hold the event are entirely attuned to the discourse on cultural syncretism's basic *flexibility* that Demby has been constructing all along.

In her review of *King Comus*, Renee Hudson comments on what she calls Demby's "absurdist style" and general detachment from chronology, in relation to the neo-slave narrative use of history. Attempting to find some meaningful connections between the two, Hudson concludes that Demby's constant distancing from records and master narratives indicates that he "plays with historical knowledge,"<sup>26</sup> possibly as a way of recovering the jocose attitude intrinsic to the act of fiction-writing. "Demby," Hudson continues, "puts equal pressure on official historical narratives and the oral histories that characterize both slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. Indeed, ... (he) doesn't seem particularly interested in the typical subject of the neo-slave narrative."<sup>27</sup> Playing with history, as he does at length with D.'s shallow reconstruction of Imperial

Rome's historical episodes, with the partial, incoherent accounts of King Comus's past, or with Tillman's grotesque re-enslavement, is not only an amusing, repetitive exercise in the distortion of history; it is, first, a way of showing the inevitable fallacy, or partiality, inherent to any historical reconstruction—whether a master narrative, or a neo-slave narrative, or even an oral storytelling—and, as a consequence of that, it is a way of recapturing the intellectual freedom necessary to rediscover the creative potential, in fiction writing, of abstruse combinations, impossible encounters, implausible events.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Demby's "playing with history" amounts also to an implicit statement on poetics in favor of *pastiche*, an anarchistic, liberating celebration of expressive freedom, and, of course, a clear distancing from the very concept of absolute truths. In the final pages of *King Comus*, all of this is revealed, as Demby's writing undergoes a sudden, cathartic experience that transforms the narrative into a wild *hellzapoppian* happening in perfect keeping with the disorderly, fragmented progress of the plot. Now, returning full circle to the sense that had already surfaced in *The Catacombs*, Rome's atmosphere lends credibility to Demby's historical untruths, thanks to its deeply secular spirit, safely nestled in the shadow of St. Peter's imposing dome. The sense of freedom derived from this paradoxical condition can be felt almost tangibly in the finale of the novel, permeated as it is by a peaceful, exhilarating sensation of rejoicing incoherence, as encapsulated in the concluding lines of the text: "all glory be to God, all glory be to our Lord, may the Lord bless you and keep you—" (*King Comus* 154).

While certainly a challenging reading, and even more demanding in terms of interpretation, *King Comus* represents a more mature novel than *The Catacombs*, especially because in it the author shows a fuller conscience of his own *métier* as a writer. What warrants that claim is Demby's increased awareness of his ambiguity in handling history—a trait that did not emerge so clearly in the first of his two Roman

novels. Contrary to how it may appear, it is a not entirely negative type of ambiguity, in that apart from being a consequence of the objective difficulty of the task he set for himself, it derives from what Demby learned in his long sojourn in Rome, concerning the impossibility of reaching a historical outlook that, in accuracy and reliability, is unquestionably *the best*. *King Comus* enacts this dilemma to begin with its multiple plotlines, each of the three narrated in a different key, and each of them contesting the authority of its own narrative mode. In the first section, the reconstruction of King Comus's personal history is partial, fragmentary, and clearly fictitious; the main plot of the second, centered on oral memories of World War II, is more realistic and autobiographical, but certainly not immune to irony; while the third and final section, dominated by a persistent discourse on the opposition sacred / profane, in the present, is the most openly fantastic and abstract. As a mature storyteller who has learned from his multi-cultural experience not to trust abstract notions like the possible existence of one historical truth, Demby wisely begins *King Comus* by warning his readers not to trust his own story in the first place:

But forgive me for I am rambling and the truth is I don't know quite how to proceed, for I am an ant traveling over one of those enormous Tapestries of Time, and I shall make mistakes of fact and observation. (*King Comus* 2)

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<sup>1</sup> Demby, William and Micconi, Giovanna. "Ghosts of History: An Interview with William Demby." *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2011, p.126; page numbers of all subsequent quotations from this interview will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Demby's long sojourn in the capital of Italy started out just about one year after Richard Wright had made the capital of France his home, and one year before James Baldwin would do the same. Another African American temporary expatriate at the American Academy in Rome, from October 1955 through December 1957, was Ralph Ellison, the author of *Invisible Man*.

<sup>3</sup> Demby, William. *Festa a Beetlecreek*, it. transl. F. Pivano. Mondadori, 1950.

<sup>4</sup> The original title of the movie, released in 1952, was *Il peccato di Anna*, directed by Camillo Mastrocinque.

<sup>5</sup> Demby, William. *The Catacombs* (1965). Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1991, p.133; subsequent quotations from this edition will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Demby, William. *King Comus*. Ishmael Reed Publishing Company, Berkeley, California, 2017; page numbers of subsequent quotations from this text will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Ewa B. Luczak, *How Their Living Outside America Affected Five African American Authors*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., Lampeter, U. K., 2010, p. 133.

<sup>8</sup> When asked by his interviewer about the style used in *The Catacombs*, Demby answers: "Well, it is consistent with the fragmentation of reality; it's not events that continue, it's time that continues. ... You start a conversation with somebody, and it leads you in another direction...I was aware that time and space, as used by cubism,

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were being influenced by new theories of time and by the reality of atomic age. There was no reason in the world why I couldn't interrupt a narrative..."; (G. Micconi, p.136).

<sup>9</sup> I allude to the correspondence between Demby's actual writing experiments in *The Catacombs* and those of his mirror-image narrator who is also engaged in writing an experimental novel.

<sup>10</sup> See G. Stein's novel *Three Lives* (1909), particularly the section entitled "Melanctha"; in 1926, in her essay "Composition as Explanation", Stein went back to her notion of continuous present and to her experiments in applying cubist techniques to her writings.

<sup>11</sup> In the final scene of the novel, Doris and her friend the Count, descend into the Catacombs along with a group of tourists, under the guidance of an Irish priest. Walking along the dark corridors, at some distance from the group, he eventually realizes that Doris is not anymore at his side. Beginning to panic, the Count starts walking in the dark, "shouting silently" and repeatedly the name of his vanished companion.

<sup>12</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, M. Holquist, (ed.); C. Emerson and M. Holquist, (translators), The University of Texas Press, Austin 1981, 84.

<sup>13</sup> The narrator's self-reflexive comment, made in the middle of a St. Peter's Square crowded with mourners, implies that he is aware of the indissoluble tie that binds together, in space and time, the exceptional event being celebrated, and its grandiose scenery, in a place dominated by the imposing mass of the Cathedral of Christianity.

<sup>14</sup> In terms of situational analogies, possible references include Marcel Camus's *La peste*, and Edith Wharton's "Roman Fever," Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*, and Karen Blixen's *Seven Gothic Tales*, that Demby certainly knew since his wife, Lucia Drudi, translated into Italian Blixen's *Out of Africa*.



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<sup>15</sup> Carlo Maria Franzero (1892-1986) was the author of a number of successful novels set in ancient Rome, mainly centered on the biography of famous old Roman citizens. The English version of Franzero's book, [The Life and Times of Cleopatra](#), was published in London (1957) by Alvin Redman, Ltd.

<sup>16</sup> Sara Marzioli, "The Subterranean Performance of History between Harlem and Rome in William Demby's *The Catacombs*", *African American Review*, Vol. 47, Nos. 2-3, Summer/Fall 2014, 420.

<sup>17</sup> Melanie Masterton Sherazi, "Note on the Text", *King Comus*, ix; subsequent quotations from this edition will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>18</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the metanarrative and self-referential aspects of Demby's *The Catacombs*, see Ugo Rubeo, "William Demby nelle 'Catacombe' di Roma," *Il Veltro* 44.1-2 (2000): 247-53.

<sup>19</sup> By "topographic memory" I allude to the method based on the reconstruction of the memory of a place through the inspection of its topography.

<sup>20</sup> Among the most influential studies of cultural and religious syncretism, see Jerry Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993, and J. Bentley, H. Ziegler, and H. S. Salter, *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> One of the greatest cultural achievements of the old Romans recognized by historians is the incorporation of an inordinate quantity of Greek expressions, notions, and images in their own language.

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<sup>22</sup> If it is true that early Christians were at times persecuted – thence the need to construct underground Catacombs – it is equally true that, apart from a few particularly fierce individuals, most emperors showed ample tolerance towards Christianity.

<sup>23</sup> In this passage, the author singles out one of the capital episodes of ancient Rome's political and religious history, in which Constantine I, the first Roman Emperor to grant religious freedom to all citizens, with the Milan edict of 313 AD, after his victory over Massentium in the Milvio Bridge battle of 312 AD; the hidden irony is that that event also marks the beginning of the fatal decline of the Western Roman Empire.

<sup>24</sup> I am thinking of movies like *La dolce vita* (1960), *8½* (1963), *Fellini Satyricon* (1969), and *Amarcord* (1973).

<sup>25</sup> Given his admiration for Latin language and literature, Demby's increased use of satire in the final pages of the novel might be yet another, intentional reference to ancient Rome, as contrarily to all other literary genres, of Greek origin, satire as a genre has been always considered a distinctly Roman creation. A famous sentence by Quintilian (Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, public orator and rhetorician of the First Century AD), “satura tota nostra est” (“satire is entirely ours”) is often quoted in support of this thesis.

<sup>26</sup> Hudson, Renee. "King Comus and the elasticity of Neo-Slave Narrative", *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Nov. 30, 2017, 5.

[https://www.academia.edu/35315051/King\\_Comus\\_and\\_the\\_Elasticity\\_of\\_the\\_Neo-Slave\\_Narrative](https://www.academia.edu/35315051/King_Comus_and_the_Elasticity_of_the_Neo-Slave_Narrative)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> In that key, the dramatization of the chaotic atmosphere surrounding the conclusion of the "Gospel Summit" could be read as a degrading parody of the Milvio Bridge battle that took place in that same area, just as King Comus's aerial apparition – again Federico Fellini comes to mind – could be seen as a mockery of the vision of the Holy Cross in the sky, predicting Constantine's victory. Stressing the influence of Italian

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cinema on Demby's fiction, Peter Christensen makes a similar point, observing that: "Demby's attention to the vulgarization of the supernatural is reminiscent of Fellini, who opened *La Dolce Vita*, with the aerial shot of a huge crucifix being moved through the air over the city." Peter. G. Christensen, "William Demby", *Contemporary African American novelists: a bio-bibliographical critical sourcebook*, Emmanuel S. Nelson, (ed.), Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1999, 125.