

## Editorial – In Memoriam

### Passings

By Geoffrey Sykes

The meeting with Marcus Solomon occurred in Calea Victoria, Bucharest Romania, and a main elegant thoroughfare, lined with embassies, main hotels, galleries, fashion shops, restaurants and museums. Visitors can be surprised by the urban buildings – much of it coming from Parisian inspired construction early in the twentieth century. Yet my meeting with Marcus was surprising in a quite unexpected way. From the counter of a franchised French bakery, my back was to the front of the shop, with only some glass panels above bread baskets by which to see into the stream parades of pedestrians and traffic outside, it was a random if fortuitous movement that caused me, at the very moment of Marcus passing on the pavement outside, to order a cheese roll. It was May 2015. I had met Marcus on several occasions over 17 years before this occasion – but always inside a lecture room, at a conference, or else at a table for dining or morning tea. Some who knew Marcus better than I, might testify to his agile walking speed. The sighting of him, as a peripheral, background vision to already busy and agile act of perusing, selecting and ordering foodstuff, would at best have been passing or incidental. Yet for some reason, I could interpret in this barest speedily passing individual, midst a canvas of streetscape, someone I knew – it must have been something in the gait, in posture, in costume, the grasp on a briefcase. I did not know who the person was – the sensed unexplained knowledge was in Peircean terms an intuition – and the brisk movement to finalise the sale, pushed through any other customers and make my way the pavement, then looked up in the direction of the moving body, in abductive gaze, my reasoning based only on very vague information. Looking from inside the shop he had been left to right, but outside there was no one to be seen on that side of the thoroughfare. But there, some 100 metres or more on the other side of the street – was the dimly perceived shape of a person I thought I knew, although I still could not identify who that person was.

This process of recognition of someone in a crowd or public place can often be mistaken. It is an example of how the mind uses fragments of a whole to recall or identify the whole. Yet such reasoning can be very fallible – indeed such reasoning relies on fallibility and error to establish reliable outcome. It is common to introduce oneself to a person whose appearance had attributes of someone you know – and might not have seen for some time – only to find, much too late, that you do not actually know the person standing directly in front. This subject, of misplaced recognition, is probably one that deserves a full and formal paper. It is a good example of the topic of faciality – of the face as a plane of signs. Yet in this instance I had not yet seen the face – only attire and posture as glimpsed in specific and animated situational context. I moved quickly yet there seemed to be more than 100 metres to catch up. The person was older, around

eighty I guessed, but how quickly could an eighty year old move. Sometime during the fast paced steps to catch up with the persona, memory kicked in and I realized whom I was chasing.

Marcus Solomon seem to be moving away the faster I followed, yet some 200 metres later he met and he was most gracious about having his focused and efficient ambulation interrupted. He remembered me from the 2010 Summer Institute of Semiotics Conference, held in Imatra, Finland. In fact we had met on two previous occasions (2005 and 1998) at that Russian castle inspired hotel, close to the Russian border, and also I assume but have no specific memory of meeting at the International Semiotic Congress in Dresden in 2009. In 2010 he heard my paper, on geo-politics and structuralism, and later in the day I had played a short game of conceptual sparring following his own paper, in a large, under-filled lecture hall, with an appreciative audience comprising a Finnish fir forest outside plate glass outside, and , along with several dozen scattered attendees within. Marcus liked an intellectual challenge, and usually won such events simply in the process of clarification of the terms of discourse. For myself, his demeanour, accent and discursive posture were quite unique. One way or another, the kernel and memory of recognition had already been planted in our respective brains – and in some uncanny flash that pre-knowledge was summoned.

He genuinely was in a rush – but graciously afforded me a few minutes squeezed from an arduous schedule. He had just returned from a Cultural conference in Istanbul, and was off the next day to Finland. But he listened to my own activities, and yes he would be happy to send in a paper for journal, and yes, also be an editor, and yes, he remembered our last meeting well.

He called me Professor, then left as quickly as he had previously passed on by. It was as if there was so much to be done, that intellectual tasks were had were publically and personally urgent, that the intellectual somehow held a privileged place in staking a direction to the future. Whether because of the accidental rare nature of the event, or the oxygen from my quick breathless scamper to catch up with Marcus, I briefly, on the board pavement that characterises most of the length of that prominent boulevard, considered how best to explain this unusual meeting – its possibility, its perception, its progress. It was a meeting of two individuals sharing a discipline, and one might symbolically locate that discipline the cultural and historical layering of Parisian, East European, Communist and modern architectural styles arrayed along that precinct of the boulevard. I knew Marcus was East European although at that moment had not concluded that he was Romanian, and did not know his specific age. If I had realized he had spent 70 years walking the same pavements – perhaps winter and political conditions had conditioned his speed of walk as much as anything else – then I might have speculated how Marcus was a survivor of different eras of Romanian history – liberal, communist, autocratic – having to fashion an academic career during years of extreme austerity and oppression. It would be possible to map his life and ideas symbolically along Calea Victoria, where the archives and oral history of this streetscape

would offer up a distinct sense of the conditions under which he had crossed disciplines, dedicating himself to logic, mathematics, semiotics and linguistics. He made himself indispensable for any regime - the intellectual life offered a refuge from harsh or changing conditions – revolutions, strikes, war, oppression, protests – that happened on these same streets. Marcus was an autodidact, but not one of the nineteenth century (like Peirce) of independent wealth. He was one born and refined out of the austerity and vicissitudes of the mid twentieth century, where intellectualism, including semiotic specialism, gave him a passport to the world – both conceptually as well as in terms of personal travel and freedom across the Cold War borders. The first generation of post WW1 modernism was reborn post WW2, and with it a renewed aspiration for rational forms of universal knowledge that could transcend cultural and national differences that wreaked such trauma on European states.

In addition, preceding any general historical knowledge of place, there was the clutter of the environment of signs that further layered the architectural streetscape. Codes of street signs, graffiti, poster and peeling ephemera, directions, shop dressage, billboard placarding and brocading walls, strips, not to mention interior prices, labels, tickets and tags - all of these sign accoutrements of an inner urban visage, with a distinct Bucharest flavour, came into play in the rapid fire micro events of the past five minutes, beginning in the franchised French bakery. These were the essential tools of discovery and recognition – yet it would never be enough to classify or recode their meanings. This myriad offers options whose meaning had to be enacted, in an interlocutory sense, by a citizen or visitor. Road signs require response – they might have aesthetic qualities, but it is not enough to gaze on them in abstraction, especially if traffic is heavy (as it was that day). This pragmatic sense, of *signum loci*, of the sign situated in a particular place, lending and gaining meaning from its location, occurred to me, in passing, and then, they passed. Marcus was not the only one busy – the next morning I had to leave for a five hour train trip to Bacau in the north of the country for a performance of a theatre work. The main reason for being in the country was artistic not academic, although in recent months I had begun to interlace the two practices, and had months later asked Marcus for a paper on Semiotics and the Arts. At that pavement meeting he offered the paper he had just given in Istanbul. The two papers by Marcus have been published in Issue 6 and 7 of Southern Semiotic Review.

Two days later I had a lunch of pizza and salad, with Nicoleta Popa Blanariu and her partner at the “Vasile Alecsandri” *University of Bacău* (“Universitatea Vasile Alecsandri” din *Bacău*). They were touched to know I had met and indeed had some acquaintance with Marcus, whom they knew and valued much. He was a native of Bacau, and was a highly regarded contributor to regional and national cultural and intellectual life. I was beginning to get a picture of Marcus very much as a public intellectual, and anything but cloistered in his research – someone who was generous with many interests as he had been with myself, who found time to be on many regional and national bodies, and was currently undertaken a review of the national Education Board.

It was only a few months later that I learned of his sudden death, and also just how old he was – 90 when I met him. He was someone with an intent, even fixed, demeanour born from serious be-speckled attention to scholarship – at conferences he seemed senior but also ageless.

His life cast a shadow of modern learning into the twenty first century, and a personal and precocious commitment to knowledge regardless of material reward that seemed unending in its motivations and satisfaction. The surprise of an actual ending, of such an example of continuities and pursuits of a modern age, provides a sense of aporia, of difficulty and puzzlement of this passing, and challenge of moving beyond all the resources and gravitas that one lifetime such as his can represent. On other hand, the passing of a life, especially of an acquaintance, can be as incidental and fleeting as meeting a person in a street. This is especially so when the person seems timeless in one life, when several propitious, seemingly ordained, meetings have occurred, then surely the hiatus of one passing will be the pretext for a further occasion, within the subtle micro text of time and place.

The introductory excursion at the Dresden 1999 biennial Congress of Semiotics was a modest affair – a visit to an exhibition on the history of the city at a city museum. I say modest partly because the display of photographs and accompanying text including those of the Allies' aerial bombing in 1945, was more factual than theatrical or grand. Even though the congress was held at the Polytechnic, on the outskirts of the main city, any visitor is inevitably aware of the transformation of its architecture and appearance caused through the catastrophe of 60 years before. In a city like Berlin one is aware of consequences on philosophy and culture of the war – Berlin can be seen as a pinnacle of a certain kind of theatrical, public postmodern anarchism in its rejection of order and traditions of philosophy, in theatre, arts and publications- and presumably in semiotic theory. Yet little of that edgy, iconoclastic postmodern demeanour could be felt the regional city of Dresden – that for most of the post War years had been under Communist rule. The regional conference organisers catered to an international and eclectic audience. The visitors transported by bus to the city museum were orderly, a little tired (the excursion occurred at the beginning of the conference), yet in a comfortable and predictable event. Despite this general sense of order, little surprises can occur.

On the plane, I had read Robert Innes book “Consciousness and the Play of Signs”, which, along with other topics, includes the author's interest in a semiotic of perception, based on the writings of Karl Bühler on the plane. A long haul flight from Australia allowed full and unusual absorption into selected and few reading materials. It seemed a full domain or subject matter had been opened up – the topic of perception, normally studied in psychology or biology, became a field of semiosis, subject to interpretation alongside the markers of culture.

Writing now about a meeting that occurred 17 years ago, reminds me that the in-flight reading of “Consciousness and the Play of Signs” might have been seminal in my interest in facial semiotics – with papers on faciality being delivered at Moscow Institute of Humanities, Buenos Aires University, and New York University at Stonybrook, Long Island, in the next year or so. Perception of faces, and facial recognition and expression, was not some holistic or natural phenomenon or process that preceded semiosis – rather it was constructed and maintained through glimpses, glances, perspectives, micro fragments and linearities of tissues, fallible muscularities and corpuscular reasoning. We need to look no further than the palpable learning of perception in a young child to understand this process – we remain, despite our habitualised behaviours as adults, linked to simplicities of childlike reasoning about the everyday reality we see. Obviously based on reflections in this reflection paper, it is a topic that does not seem to have been exhausted.

It turned out the first person I spoke to (at length) in Dresden was Robert. He was sitting next to me on the bus going to the museum. We introduced ourselves, I expressed surprised, I complimented him on the book of course, and he said how pleased he was to meet someone who had read the volume and so well. Academic authors can value such immediate feedback from the unknown international scattered readers of a publication.

That casual interchange led to a meeting – some three years later – in Cambridge, and an extended interview with Robert on Peirce, and the history and philosophy of American pragmatism. Robert graciously conducted a long interview over a day on many subjects in the lovely interior and surroundings of his house in Cambridge, New England. One segment of this video has been included in a previous issue of Southern Semiotic Review – another one is included in this issue. The context of that video is more elaborate than I can explain just now – however it will become relevant later in this article.

Robert’s expertise in American philosophy extends with tempered passion to the pragmatists – and their belief that what and how we think very much relates to experiences in the world that, in the words of Dewey, the mind is in the world and that subject indeed had relevance to what happened next in Dresden. Upstairs in the exhibition on the history of the city in its museum, I was standing behind a room divider in front of some copies of copies of Dresden as it was, bombed and flattened, at the end of WW2. The pictures were inevitably arresting in content if a little washed out in resolution and also somehow familiar - and their presentation and the room generally documented and factual, rather than compelling attention to their subject matter. The exhibition worked well for the purpose of the conference – attendees began to mingle and talk, and the subject on the wall acted as a good conversation starter or background to the main business at hand, to meet and greet other guests.

There was one other person next to me behind the divider. We were separated from the rest of the crowd in the room. The man was male, burly, older than myself, and we shared an impression about photos without turning or making eye contact. I am not sure if it was a quality in the voice or a sideways glimpse that led me to realize I was standing next to, and conversing, with no less than Umberto Eco – who was an invited keynote speaker at the congress.

I immediately exchanged pleasantries while realizing there would be little time to continue. Whether through obligation or necessity, he would soon circulate amidst the crowd in the centre of the room. So I asked if I could ask a question, and then asked the following – after two decades considering and utilising the work of Peirce, what did he ultimately conclude about the consequences of pragmatism for his own culturally based paradigm of semiotics. Were the two entirely compatible? Words to that effect. He smiled. The answer was postponed and brief when it came. No, he said. No, he repeated, in a quiet aside, almost as if it was not meant to be heard. And that was that. He touched me gently on my coat, and was off into the room – someone it seems had beckoned him.

The next time I saw Eco he was delivering a main lecture. His fame had preceded him. Campus students had been invited as well as conference attendees – the main auditorium was packed, the talk was prepared, read and quite formal. The casual, candid demeanour found in the meeting at the museum had gone – and I not sure that that question and its answer would have been possible again.

I have later thought how appropriate that the keynote semiotician of European culture – of semiology in the tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure – had little to say as he stood in front of pictures of a city of pre-eminent European culture that was virtually destroyed by war, that followed on from its abhorrent mid-century government. The centuries old layering of cultural significations, that were the supermarket of Eco's study, were gone, the shelves of signs emptied, culture stopped. Did we move too quickly from that linguistic Armageddon? Have we learnt all we need to know, all that we should and could learn, from that catastrophe? These were the questions I should have asked Eco.

When the death of Umberto Eco was announced, last year, it seemed quite symbolic. The occasion was the opportunity to a lifetime achievement, in scholarship and fiction. In a sense the work transcended the life of the author – the author might be dead, to cite Roland Barthes, but his texts would outlast and endure in a kind of semiotic immortality. The occasional meeting with him, 16 years before was, I am sure, long forgotten by Eco, and almost quite forgotten by myself, until this small memoriam to several recent passings, brought it to mind.

There were two links from that meeting at the Dresden museum to events that happened three years later in Paris and Montbazin in the South of France. Gerard Delledalle had his residence in the town of Montbazin, on the hills overlooking the Mediterranean. Roman, medieval and religious buildings were present in the old town, as they did in many smaller regional towns scattered throughout France. Gerard lived in

a three storey residence near shops in the old part of town, in what was once the vintner's old residence. He said he had bought it in a rundown unwanted state decades before, and gradually restored charm into what was now an intellectual household. Parts of the old vineyard were still visible from a large patio on the top floor, although other parts were subject to housing subdivision. The house was charming, sprawling with stateliness of staircase to three libraries, dining room, kitchen and bedrooms, with the old cellars in the basement making a spacious studio bedroom. This setting would well befit the presence and work of Umberto - yet Gerard's own publication and research seemed strangely divorced from the immediate surrounds.

Gerard was not a specialist in European philosophy. His specialism was American philosophy, and since World War Two he had become known as a main exponent of the ideas of James, Mead, Dewey, Royce, and in particular, the seminal figure of American philosophy, Charles Peirce. Dewey was a student of Peirce, and before the war, Deledalle was a student of Dewey.

I found this biographical lineage out, for the first time, when he drove me into the small internal garage of the home, having picked me up from Montpellier airport only a few days following the Dresden congress. It followed my previous visit to Montbazin a year before, following the 1998 Summer Institute at Imatra where we first fortuitously meet. "But you are a philosopher" he said. "Not formally". He was impressed with our discourse on Peirce then - beginning with my paper. There were three days on Peirce, a reason to travel the long haul from Australia, to find necessary essential contacts to complete my doctorate, half of which was an intellectual history of Peirce.

In the case, at start of the visit, in that garage, he said, with French irony, 'Welcome to the museum.'

'Yes it looks like a fine building,' I said.

'Not the building. It is I, who am the museum,' Gerard said, in passing, as the Peugeot sank with pneumatic exhausted and we clambered, with luggage, through a narrow door.

He then explained the short biographical facts stated above - more a sanguine reflection on age, and the pleasant happenings of life, than a boast of any kind.

Soon afterwards I was escorted by Janice, Gerard's attentive wife, into a small visitor's bedroom upstairs, when it was suggested by Gerard we could meet again at 5, in the semiotic library, for a discourse. The layout of the house, along with some its organisation (including the dining room and secret kitchen) was at first as delightful as it was unusual for someone from the southern continent - but at the content of inquiry and talk in this house belied its appearance. Pragmatics was a long way removed for the formal refinement of European households. Pragmatism was a philosophy of experience

and perception, it stressed how meaning arose through everyday events and communication.

Four years later, there was to be a third visit to Montbazin – Gerard kindly agreed to be interviewed at length over several days and in those delightful interiors – on his philosophy, biography and experiences. In particular, the aim was to encapsulate, by way of oral philosophy, the ideas of American thinkers through their main European exponent. Robert Innes was to be the second voice for the work – I thought an American voice would enhance Gerard’s contributions even more, and provide a transatlantic exchange of mutual ideas.

I also hoped to get contacts through Gerard to interview one or more keynote European thinkers – including Umberto Eco. Gerard would be well positioned, and one hoped something with Eco would certainly be possible, even on the same trip.

I travelled on a round ticket via America – if I had gone via Asia the outcome of this short narrative might have been different. By the time I reached France there had been a turn of events for the worse. I rang Janice and she said not to come – he had been hospitalised, wait a few days, she said. I was esconced in a small unrenovated room, with a 4<sup>th</sup> floor Juliet balcony overlooking the East Bank and Palaise de Justice, in the Henri IV hotel, on the *Île de la Cité*. This stunning and affordable prime cultural and historical location was at odds with a personal, restless unease – that this trip would not be fulfilled, that my host was so unwell, critically so, that so much seemed to be on a knife’s edge. A phone call two days later – from a little booth on the Seine – told the worst that I could only begin to fear beforehand.

Gerard had passed away, in the hospital. He had never come back home. Janice told me that while he was sedated, he said he had to go home because Geoffrey was coming for the interview. One can be touched at the unending project of semiotic philosophy that endured to his last days and hours. Who knows, he must have thought, it might have been possible for him to be safely brought home again – and to conduct further discourse in the semiotic library

The immediate response to that news, from Janice, at the small phone booth on the *Île* on the edge of the Seine, was one of overpowering emotion, anything but intellectual. The passing had immediate grief and loss – at the loss of a person, a colleague and mentor, an endearing collaboration, and even of this round world journey. Mixed regrets were bundled in a moment I probably have not fully understood or returned to fully – a passing can be a discontinuity that is too hard to move through.

One speaks of three individuals who never retired, who lived full lives committed under differing circumstances to a pursuit that centred on the twentieth century discipline or pursuit of semiotic. They kept that pursuit alive for the better part of the 20th century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> – their lives put paid to any notion that semiotics died prematurely decades ago, or is in itself a failed or obscure or arcane pursuit.



To say that is not to suggest that the respective work of the scholars cannot be developed – or critiqued – to move onwards in this century that might need to be the case. One can use the context of this informal obituary to outline a possible direction.

Two of these three scholars – Eco and Solomon - shared a belief in rationalism, indeed logic that is often used in critiques of semiotics. There can be a cognitivism assumed or entertained in their work that can be at odds with other directions in the humanities - since Foucault's critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss – that desire for a more social reality and political conceptions of language and sign systems. These scholars can be regarded as modernist in a belief in the search for transparent universal logico-semiotic systems that generalise and transcend individual experience.

What would a postmodern semiotic then look like, that does not commence with idealist assumptions about the mind? One does not need to look for an answer for it is contained in the American tradition of pragmatism, and its accord with European phenomenology, built on individual experience. This is a more moderate, understated postmodern direction than the anarchic artistic collective expressions of post war Berlin. This stress communicative exchange, perception, individual acts and interpretation. Within such a perspective, informal meetings such as outlined in this article become something more than minor accidents – they become the building blocks and kernel of a way of doing research and of being in the world.

A perceptual phenomenology can have a lot to say about casual meetings. Life is full of passing, or passing-bys. Appearances, and disappearances. Presence and absence. Light and shadows. Memory, intentionality and rationality, can struggle to keep pace with the nuanced micro flux that is at play just below the quotidian reality. Signs come into play, to mediate between the known and unknown, to point to what is peripheral or not known. Our vision does not need to be as melodramatic as the baby you cries when a parent leaves the room and cannot be seen. Death is not that imminent – although in a way we die a millions times over in one lifetime, to the myriad acquaintances and friends we encounter. We are lost, forgotten, remote – but suddenly can reappear, reborn as it were.

Of the three scholars, Gerard was the one who was most familiar with semiotic phenomenology, and would have comfortably located it. Gerard well knew of Dewey's complex notion of mind in the world, of how our pursuit of ideas is very akin to the tracing of a map, and lines of reasoning in one regard can be as literal as the markings in the centre of that Bucharest boulevard.

Three figures, three passings, three semiotic paradigms all at play, interlacing and linking the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. A history of ideas can readily be studied biographically, indeed in any pragmatics it in one sense must be so studied. Rather than a disembodied quasi platonic play of concepts, intellectual history can be embodied through the lives of exponents of particular disciplines, whose lives become more than

personal, but intellectual biographies where key events, emotions and relationships can all be synchronised to the development of key ideas being espoused or followed.

In this case the demise or loss of a major thinker is heralded in public and scholarly life as being something much more than personal. A death becomes a milestone in intellectual history. It can mark the conceptual limitations of our paradigms of knowledge, it can motivate reflection and evaluation on a system of knowledge as much as the achievement of one individual.

In the last decade, the loss of these significant figures in semiotics, seems to mark the culmination, if not the twilight, of two great movements in modern semiotics. Their loss provides a positive opportunity to take stock, and evaluate where we are now. How to carry on the flame by which they illuminated their particular style of knowledge? Can their respective traditions be easily continued, or have they now become part of a history of ideas that should be critiqued and seen largely in the past tense? Should the biographical ending be used positively as philosophical aporia and an opportunity to move beyond and supplement what was already accomplished?

## ***In memoriam Solomon Marcus***

### **The Rest is Silence\***

Nicoleta Popa Blanariu

In the semioticians' community, the spring of 2016 has come as mournful as, perhaps, never before. Several weeks ago, Umberto Eco died, and today, only days after his 91<sup>st</sup> anniversary, Solomon Marcus. A tenured member of the Romanian Academy, Vice-president of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, *doctor honoris causa* of "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, enjoying worldwide recognition for his contributions in domains that the epistemological tradition saw more as disjoint – Mathematics and Computer Science, Linguistics, Poetics and Semiotics –, the academician Solomon Marcus was truly an "honorary citizen" of the city of Bacău, one of its most credible and prestigious ambassadors. An ambassador of Bacău and of the city's school, to which he returned so often, with a solicitude and naturalness that increased the value of his attachment to his hometown, rendering it even more impressive. Several editions of the scientific manifestations organised by the Faculty of Letters and Faculty of Sciences welcomed him as guest of honour.

I believed he enjoyed, especially in his last years, to be the Professor and the Wise Man, and both roles suited him perfectly. On the other hand, the drift of the educational system in recent years demanded personalities able to draw the attention of the public opinion to the real problems of school and guide it towards finding solutions. The academician did not remain indifferent and felt obliged to get involved, supporting the need for a project of reconsideration of the Romanian educational system.

His career was built, I would say, on the coherence of heterogeneity. He saw connections where the tradition of the Sciences and the Humanities had placed borders that could only be transgressed at the risk of losing one's credibility in the academic world. Solomon Marcus encouraged, even legitimized this interdisciplinary dialogue by means of which study domains could become mutually supportive. Through his eyes, the world made sense and life gained meaning. His blue look skated above things, as if seeing everything, understanding everything, but stooping only over what was worthy. Hence, he knew so many interesting things – about numbers, poetry, signs and meanings – which he placed, in a fascinating manner, in edifying, unusual relations.

Years ago, before the '90s, when Romania could not even dream of the Schengen space, he was denied, at one point, the exit visa to participate in a conference in the West. And then – as Solomon Marcus related the event with amusement – Umberto Eco announced in plenary speech that the Romanian guest was not present because he "suffered from passport". Today, they are both gone, and I feel that a world – a little wiser and more fond of books – is also gone. We are left with their memory and their work as

testimony of a world that was and of two men that passed, as of their lifetime, into story. Solomon Marcus is the hero of such an extraordinary biography: a child from a neighbourhood of interwar Bacău, who experienced the horror of the legionary dictatorship of the '40s, and managed to succeed and forgive – and, moreover, to give. A man who equally loved to know and share what he knew. A rare person, made from special alloy. Marcus *forever*.

\*Romanian version: „Restul e tăcere”, in *Ateneu*, no. 560, 2016, p. 13.  
[http://ateneu.info/wp-content/uploads/at2016\\_04\\_net.pdf](http://ateneu.info/wp-content/uploads/at2016_04_net.pdf)

## **Art and science at the same table**

### **Creative Arts and Scientific Research under the same Umbrella**

Solomon Marcus  
Stoilow Institute of Mathematics  
Romanian Academy

In the predominant mentality, the role of subjective factors in exact and natural sciences is very poor. It was really poor until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; when the belief in a sharp distinction between subject and object began to diminish in all fields. This fact involved a general attenuation of the contrasts between art and science. This thing is not enough known, if not totally ignored, because the dominant systems of education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century failed in this respect.

The emergence of signs, the development of sign processes need attention in all directions, they are not the exclusive privilege of arts and humanities. We will try to bridge this gap. Indeed, there is a gap between the internal life of science, the very nature of scientific creativity, on the one hand, and the dry way science is exposed at all levels, from general school till university, with accent on procedure and operations, rather than on ideas and imagination. The true life of the so-called heavy sciences remains hidden to the general public. We will take one by one some basic ideas of semiotics and show their real face in the field of heavy sciences. We will begin with the role of the subject (in its relation to the object), then we will discuss the nature of scientific creativity (versus the artistic creativity), the emergence of meaning in heavy sciences, the way science rises the problem of existence and infinity, the essential presence of transcendence, of the negation-affirmation interplay (Tarasti 2000)

As we will see, all these problems involve semiotic processes.

### **Bohr, Heisenberg and Heidegger challenge the subject-object distinction**

Classical science, as it was launched by Galilei and Newton, was based on the tacit but firm assumption of the existence of a sharp distinction between subject and object and on the assumption that the subject has no significant impact on the object of investigation. In other words, the latter is never significantly modified by the former or by the tools it is using in the investigation process. Generations after generations repeated the claim that science is objective, while poetry and art are subjective. Step by step, and from various directions, this representation of the subject-object relation had to be replaced by another one, revealing an increasing role of the subject and the increasing difficulty to establish a border between subject and object.

The most spectacular results in this respect were Niels Bohr's complementarity principle and Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, both stated in the same year 1927, when Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* is published. All these three authors throw a shadow over our capacity to distinguish the subject from the object. Heidegger considers that, as observers, we are a part of the world we are trying to describe. To some extent, when we begin to describe it, we introduce a separation from our practical life. A large part of what we are communicating and thinking is not deliberate; through it, it is our biological evolution and our cultural history that acquire meaning. According to Bohr, classical exact sciences were looking for a unique mode of description, able to eliminate any possible influence of the observer, of the subject. The description of nature was based on the determination of a line of separation between the object and the subject, so the role of the observer was negligible. This no longer happens in quantum physics. Bohr stated that one cannot measure at the same time the particle features (position, speed) and the wave features (wave length, frequency, amplitude) of an electron. Any experiment is obliged to select one of these two aspects. Heisenberg is also concerned with quantum objects. He stated that one cannot measure with unlimited accuracy both the position and the speed of a quantum object: measuring one of them is always at the expense of the accuracy in measuring the other one. This impossibility is factual, so it is not a result of the insufficient knowledge of the quantum object. In both cases (Bohr and Heisenberg) we are faced with some conjugate pairs, i.e., with some pairs of requirements, each of them very natural, but getting in conflict when they are considered together. So, the compromise is unavoidable: each of them can be satisfied only at the expense of the other. So, "complementarity does not mean collaboration, It always involves mutual exclusiveness among the considered terms" (Bohr, 1961:71).

### **Gamow on the crisis of observation at the atomic level**

At the quantum level, the instruments we are using modify the behavior of the quantum object, events at this scale cannot be observed and registered with certainty. In this respect, Gamow (1958:3) proposes some interesting analogies:

*In the world of everyday experience we can observe a phenomenon and register its behavior, without significant interference in its development. But if we try to take the temperature of a cup of coffee with the same thermometer we use to take the temperature of the water in a big recipient, then obviously the thermometer will absorb so much heat that the temperature of the coffee will change significantly. We can avoid this difficulty, by using a small chemical thermometer,*

*whose influence on the coffee temperature will be negligible. One can even take the temperature of an object having the dimensions of a living cell if we use a miniature instrument, whose caloric capacity is almost negligible. But at the atomic scale we can never observe the modification determined by the introduction of a measure instrument. The impossibility to determine both the cinematic and the dynamic properties of quantum objects shows that at this level of reality no clear separation is possible between the action of the observer and the phenomena observed.*

For Bohr, what we call 'phenomenon' in quantum physics is no longer something that happens in an 'objective reality', but "a totality of effects that can be observed in some given experimental conditions" (Bohr 1961: 85).

### **From quantum to computational and from physics to psychoanalysis**

Quantum complementarity was supplemented by a principle of computational complementarity (Svozil 1993). If the author of an experiment is part of a system S, then any measurement of some aspect of S makes impossible the measurement of another, complementary aspect. If the physical world is conceived as the result of a universal computation, then complementarity becomes unavoidable in its operational perception.

According to Gilbert Durand (disciple of Gaston Bachelard), the author of *Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle has a correspondent in the field of humanities: the impossibility to make precise both terms of a couple of entities which are naturally associated. The germ of this situation appears already with Freud and Jung: insight a phenomenon we may have two contradictory things, such that when one of them is made explicit by observation or explanation, the other remains in obscurity. For Durand, the conscious and the unconscious are exactly in this situation. If one of them can be the object of a psychological investigation, then the other is no longer available psychologically, it becomes only a reservoir of socio-cultural and historical effects and resonances (Durand 1987:149-161).

## **Objective information, a chimera; from thermodynamics and biology to semiotics**

The study of information emerged in the second half of the 19th century, from two sources: thermodynamics, for information as a quantitative entity, and Darwinian biology, for information as form, i.e., as a qualitative entity. Only the second itinerary agrees with the Latin etymology of 'information'. The first itinerary led in the 20th century to Shannon's information theory born from the idea to separate information from meaning. Messages are reduced to signals and the information can be measured. But the price we have to pay in order to measure the information is to renounce to its meaning aspect. Measured information is objective, but poor. On the other hand, information as form knows in the 20th century a spectacular itinerary. F. de Saussure, E. Cassirer, B. Russell - A.N. Whitehead, G. Lukacs, D'Arcy Thompson, D. Hilbert, Russian formalism, Max Scheler, A. Jolle, V. Propp, M. Ghyka, L. Hjelmslev, R. Huyghe, R. Thom, R. Spencer-Brown, G. Bateson, U. Maturana-F.Varela, B. Mandelbrot, D. Hofstadter have, as a common denominator, the attention paid to various aspects of form. But information and meaning remained with the status of a conjugate pair. The field of objective information is very restricted, most information is of a mixed subjective-objective nature, as we have shown in (Marcus 1997a).

After many attempts, the marriage between information and meaning proved to be impossible. All kinds of compromises were adopted. Biology is still looking for an adequate notion of information. Let us recall that already towards the end of the 19th century the German biologist Augustus Weismann (1892) observes that it seems that in the field of heredity there are phenomena that cannot be explained only in terms of matter and energy; we need something more, and Weismann called it 'information'. After the appearance of Shannon's information theory, many authors in biology adopted his view. They did not observe that Shannon is dealing with global aspects of information, while in the field of heredity we need a local idea of information, able to make meaningful the information of a DNA string, for instance. Ultimately, the help came from the so-called cybernetics of second order, including the observer; the start in this respect belongs to Bateson (1973), who also proposes a new notion of information: it is a difference that makes a difference. In order to make clearer the mixed subjective-objective nature of this way to understand information, Hoffmeyer and Emmeche (1991) arrange Bateson's definition in the following form: it is a difference that it is perceived by somebody as a difference. In this way, the dependence of information from a subject for whom it makes sense is made explicit.

### **The competition between information and sign**

Sören Brier (CD-ROM, article 99169) formulates the problem whether the Wiener-Schrödinger quantitative paradigm of information could successfully cope with the



problems of meaning and communication in living systems, in language systems and in social systems. In this respect, the information paradigm was in competition with the semiotic paradigm as it was developed by Ch. S. Peirce and, in the 20th century, by Thomas Sebeok, the initiator of biosemiotics. Schrödinger (1946), and Bateson (1973) are considered by Brier as expressing an analogy between information, on the one hand, and neg-entropy and evolutionary order, as accumulation of thermodynamic neg-entropy, on the other hand. A link is suggested in this way, observes Brier, between matter and mind and, consequently, the possibility of artificial intelligence, followed by the possibility to transfer human mind on internet, under the form of self organizing programs. Making a clear distinction between the Shannon variant and the Wiener variant of information theory, Brier associates to Schrödinger and Wiener not only the name of Bateson, but also those of Stonier (1997) and of L. von Bertalanffi, the founder of system theory via biology. Brier sees in this line of thought a way to bridge information and consciousness, life and *qualia*. Making a synthesis of this approach, Brier claims that people, machines, animals and organizations process information in the same way. But he shows that this is true only if we ignore intuitions and emotions and we take in consideration only the conscious and logical thinking, while understanding is reduced to the analytical one. The subject is seen only in its cognitive aspect and, in this respect, we have a tendency to see it as a computer. Brier is suggesting in this way the compromise making information able to simulate human existence. Some improvements came from thermodynamics far from equilibrium, non-linear dynamics, deterministic chaos, and fractals. But despite all these additions, the information paradigm remains powerless in respect to meaning and sense.

### **Other failures in separating the subject from the object: induction, linguistic relativism and constructivism**

The reasoning by induction was traditionally considered as a way to acquire knowledge about the objective world. At a careful examination however, we realize that induction is not a move from particular to general, it is a circular itinerary between them. Indeed, let us consider an experiment leading to a finite number of points in the plane, telling us that at various moments  $t$  we had a specific position of coordinates  $t, s(t)$ . If we want now to dress a curve passing by all these points, we have to make a choice among infinitely many possibilities and this choice is determined by a previous idea we have about the respective phenomenon or by a purely psychological aesthetic need. So, subject and object become actors in the same game and it is impossible to separate their actions.

Another example of subject-object interference is the so-called linguistic relativism analyzed by Sapir (1921) and Whorf (1956) and according to which our very perception of the physical world is programmed by the language we speak. For instance, it was proved that the perception of colors is strongly influenced by the way in which color

terminology is structured. On the other hand, authors such as Black (1962), Fishman (1960) and Herriot (1977), accepting the interest of Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis, try to restrict its domain of validity. Computer programming languages confirm to some extent the linguistic relativism.

In the last decades, a new doctrine emerged, called (linguistic) constructivism, whose main claim is that each speaker is building on its own the meanings of its language. The process of learning a language is a personal construction, a creative one, while the competence to perform this construction comes from our innate resources (Chomsky 1975; Siegfried Schmidt and his journal SPIEL, Grace (1987).

### **Predictions and speech acts under the sign of self-reference**

The field of predictions is another example of subject-object circularity. Not all predictions are in this situation. Prediction of solar or lunar eclipses is based on a clear separation between the subject making the prediction and the object of prediction. Man has no influence on the movement of planets around the sun. It is not the same situation in the case of meteorological predictions, Man's influence on the state of the atmosphere is no longer negligible, as it was until the 19th century. Various modifications of the man-nature relations, as a result of the scientific, technological and social evolution, may have a considerable impact on the ecological system of our planet and the warnings coming from authors such as Commoner (1990) and Toynbee (12 volumes 1934, 1939, 1954, 1959, 1961) are symptomatic in this respect. Some changes observed in the last decades in the climate of our planet are the result of the human action. A sharp, rigorous separation between the subject making the meteorological prediction and the climate forming the object of the prediction no longer exists, although the precise nature of this influence exercised by human action on the atmosphere around us is not yet well known.

The circular nature of predictions becomes clearer and more significant when they are applied to the economic-social life. The subject making a social prediction belongs to the human society that is just the object of his prediction; at the same time, the society (in contrast with the atmosphere, in the case of meteorological predictions) may become aware of the predictions concerning its future development and change its behavior, in order to invalidate the prediction. Opinion polls before various types of elections are typical in this respect, they have sometimes a decisive influence and this is the reason why they are under interdiction in the immediate days preceding elections. Another interesting situation is that of a prediction made by an economist, concerning some events whose realization essentially depends of the decision factors in economy, while the prediction was required just by the same decision factors, in order to know what decision to take.

Very relevant is the so-called speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), whose basic assumption is expressed just by the title of Austin's book: the possibility to do things with words. Speech acts can simultaneously assert and perform (establish) the fact they are asserting. The sign becomes its own object. Promising or requiring something is a speech act, because in this case language is not referring to something exterior to it, it is referring to a situation created just by it. Once more, self reference is present.

### **From communication about the world to communication about communication**

Communication is another process with strong self-referential tendencies. Marshall McLuhan's slogan "the medium is the message" (see McLuhan 1962), later the title of another book, by Lepri ("Medium e message: 1986, 2000) calls attention on a typical self-referential process in contemporary communication: the initial message about the world is step by step abandoned in favor of another one, about itself. The medium, initially a simple window to permit us to convey a message, becomes itself a message, claiming to be the main message we have to convey. The subject-object distinction is again in question. As subjects, we communicate, we change messages either about the world around us, or about our own person. At this stage, we may assume that the subjects which communicate may be firmly different from the object of the communication process. In other words, we start by communicating about the world. This first step, let us call it communication of first order, is followed by a second one, where the object of communication is just the communication of the first order. Continuing in this way, we reach, for any positive integer  $n$ , a communication process of order  $n$ . So, at least theoretically, the communication of the first order, let us call it primary communication, because it is directly about the world, is replaced step by step by communication about communication (more precisely, communication of order  $n$  about communication of order  $n-1$ ). Is this a purely speculative way to approach communication? Not at all! Look in any newspaper and you will find out that most news are communication of higher order, only a few of them belong to the primary communication.

Now, it is clear that any new intermediate level in the escalation of the communication process will work also as a new source of deterioration of the initial message. For  $n$  enough large, the risk to get at the  $n$ -th step of the process a very distorted message with respect to the initial one is increasing.

But the big danger is that in most cases we no longer can reconstitute the initial message and sometimes even its existence is doubtful. Take for instance the huge enterprise called "Science Citation Index", where we find, for any published paper, who cited it, when and where. A big rooted tree is born in this way, but in most cases we don't know exactly the root, because it is very far in the past, and we don't know its further evolution, so it is a fragment only of a tree. Such trees account for that adventure of human being we call

science. Communication turns to itself and it generates a new universe, the universe of communication, challenging the proper universe and sometimes replacing it abusively.

### **Models and metaphors: bridging the subject and the object**

Tarasti considers (2000:11) that the subject becomes an existential being that creates the meaning across two acts, the first of which happens within the framework of objective signs. The emergence of meaning in science is placed within this framework but, as we have shown (Marcus 1997b), signs occurring in this process are not just objective, they cannot avoid the subject-object circularity. Let us recall that a model B for a phenomenon A aims to study A by a method incompatible with the nature of A or with its degree of complexity, but compatible with B. We need this strategy in those cases in which methods compatible with A prove to be insufficient for the understanding of A. For instance, if A is an empirical phenomenon, it cannot be directly approached by a mathematical method; we imagine then a formal construction B, by means of which we try to simulate the phenomenon A. Similarly, if A' is an entity that cannot be sufficiently understood in terms directly referring to A', we imagine another entity B' by means of which we could express better some properties of A'. For instance, if we want to say that somebody is courageous, beautiful, powerful, proud, noble, we better use a metaphor B' such as 'lion' and we say 'he is a lion'; in this way, by a single, very expressive word, we express better what we wanted to say. A model B of A accounts only partially for A, because their analogy is only in some respect true. Moreover, B has to fulfill two opposite requirements: on the one hand, B should be enough similar to A, in order to have a chance that what is valid and relevant for B is valid and relevant also for A; on the other hand, B should be enough different from A, in order to have a chance to find a method applicable to B, but not to A. So, B is only an approximation of A and this approximation can be always improved. There exists no final model of A, there is only a potentially infinite sequence of cognitive models 'converging' to A. Something similar happens with the metaphor. There is a permanent tension between *frame* and *focus*, to use the terminology of Black (1962), in analogy with the tension existing between an object and its model. The focus is both similar to and different from the frame; similar, to show that it refers to the frame; different, in order to be able to bring something new, i.e., different with respect to the given frame (in "he is a lion", 'he' is the frame, while 'lion' is the focus). It appears that both models and metaphors have a conflictual structure, because they have to fulfill opposite requirements, like in the *double bind* situation known from psychiatry. For a more detailed comparative analysis of models and metaphors, see Marcus (1997b).

## The creative power of models and metaphors; their circular structure

Now we have to show how models and metaphors acquire a cognitive and creative function, how do they make possible the emergence of meaning in science. Let us consider the example of the emergence of the idea of irrationality, so important for the Greek antiquity and playing a basic role in Tarasti's approach; for him, the existential thinking should be in its essence irrational. For those who fear that we give to this word a meaning different from what Tarasti has in view, we will come back on this question later. Pythagoras discovered the impossibility to find a number corresponding to the length of the diagonal of a unit square; for that time, only numbers which are of the form  $p/q$ , with  $p$  and  $q$  positive integers and  $q$  different from zero were known. The problem was how to enlarge the idea of a number, in such a way that the respective diagonal could be measured. The difficulty was determined by the fact that no number of the form  $p/q$  exists whose square is equal to 2. To put it in the form of a question, we will formulate it as follows: imagine an extension of the idea of a number, according to which, in the new framework, there exists a number  $x$  which is, in respect to 2 in a relation similar to that of  $n$  with respect to the square of  $n$  ( $n$  being a positive integer). If we succeed to solve this problem and because  $n$  is said to be the square root of the square of  $n$ , we will call  $x$  the square root of 2. As a matter of fact, it took about two thousands years to solve the respective problem; it happened in the second half of the 19th century, when the general notion of a real number was introduced. However, much earlier a special sign for the square root of 2 was introduced, despite the fact that this picture for  $x$  was meaningless. But here a remark is necessary: it was meaningless conceptually, but it was not at all meaningless metaphorically. Indeed,  $x$  is introduced by means of an analogy and the abbreviation of this analogy is just the metaphor:  $x$  is the square root of 2. In what is different this metaphor from the usual metaphors such as Aristotle's metaphor "Oldness is the evening of life" ? Aristotle's metaphor is the result of the analogy: "oldness is in respect to life what evening is in respect to the day". All entities involved here, *oldness*, *life*, *evening* and *day*, have an already existing clear status. On the contrary, in the Pythagoras situation only three vertices of the square have an already established conceptual status: 2,  $n$  and square of  $n$ ; the fourth vertex  $x$  is conceptually meaningless and the role of the metaphor is just to help the emergence of a new concept. We could say that in Aristotle's situation the metaphor has an assertive structure, while in the case of Pythagoras the metaphor has an interrogative structure. Aristotle's metaphor is with respect to an already existing entity, while Pythagoras's metaphor is no longer with respect to an entity which is pre-existent to the metaphorical process, but with respect to an entity which emerges just under the action of the metaphorical process: the notion of a real number. Clearly, in the second case we have a circular, self-referential situation, a subjective - objective process. According to a terminology introduced by Mac Cormac ( ), we call Aristotle's metaphor epiphoric, while Pythagoras metaphor was during two

thousands years diaphoric and became epiphoric only in the 19th century. Let us observe that there are creative metaphors eternally diaphoric, for instance the metaphors of the Divinity. There are also creative metaphors today diaphoric, but that can become epiphoric in a near or distant future.

### **The psychological identity of scientific and artistic creativity**

One of the most interesting analysis of the psychological nature of scientific creativity is the book "Essai sur la psychologie de l'invention mathématique" by Jacques Hadamard (first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century); English edition: (Hadamard 1954). Hadamard sees the process of scientific invention in three steps. There is first a *preparation*, that can be very long (accumulation of data, some of which are selected for further specific combinations); a second step is *incubation* (period in which some ideas are reconsidered, by a process that cannot be kept under control); then comes the third step, *illumination*, including the unexpected appearance of a new, seductive combination, which in many cases may disappoint. The last step, conscious and rational, is of verification and accuracy of details.

After this description of the psychology of invention/discovery in mathematics, Hadamard makes reference to a letter sent by Mozart to his sister (he mentions that this letter is reproduced in Séailles (1883:177). Here is the letter:

*When I am in a good mood or when I am walking after a good meal, or during the night, when I cannot sleep, I am overwhelmed by all kinds of thoughts. How do they appear ? I don't know and I am not interested in this. I keep those that I like and sometimes I begin to hum them; or at least other people told me that I proceed in this way. As soon as I find out a theme, another melody appears, joining the previous one, in agreement with the global requirements of the composition: the counterpoint, the part of each instrument. All these melodic fragments yield the whole work. If nothing diverts my attention, my soul is in the fire of inspiration. The work grows; I extend it, I see it clearer and clearer, until I have in my head the whole composition. My mind seizes it at once, in the same way in*

*which my eye captures by only one look a beautiful painting or a good-looking boy. The work does not appear to me in successive steps, with each part in details, as it will later happen, it is offered to my imagination as a whole.*

*How does it happen that, when I am working, my compositions get the mozartian form and style ? Exactly as it happens that my big and aquiline nose is only mine. I don't look for originality and it would be difficult for me to define my style.*

Hadamard observes the striking similarity between his representation of the psychology of mathematical creativity and Mozart's representation of the psychology of musical creativity: both are organized according the scenario "preparation - incubation - illumination - verification and accuracy of details". The culminating step in this scenario is the third one, the illumination, associated by excellence to creativity; it is the explosion that in semiotics is usually associated with the abductive moment dominating the inductive and the deductive components, but impossible in absence of them.

### **Illumination as culminating moment of creativity is bridging illumination as symptom of transcendence**

Now, going back to Tarasti's approach, we will observe how important is for him the illumination moment. In the second chapter of his book, "Signs and transcendence", the symptom of transcendence is a unexpected (surprising) illumination. At p. 21, Tarasti points out how a usual experience may change step by step in a transcendent one, taking the form of a new illumination of a sign, of an object, of a text from the field of *Dasein*. Giving several examples from the field of music, Tarasti observes (2000:29) that, examining the message of an artist, the semiotician reaches the illumination of existence, as expression of the individual subject. So, illumination as symptom of transcendence reaches the illumination as culminating moment of creativity, be it scientific or artistic.

The importance of the illumination moment is asserted also by writers such as Lamartine and Paul Valéry and by scientists such as Henri Poincaré, Helmholtz, Charles Hermite, K. Weierstrass and Joseph Bertrand. This fact is organically associated to the importance of the unconscious factors (dreams, other activities during sleeping), intuitive and emotional factors in all types of human creativity.

## **Creativity as articulation of choices and combinations**

Paul Valéry asserts that any act of intelligence involves two types of operations: choices and combinations; but genius is mainly related to happy choices. Poincaré has similar opinions, but he believes that possible rules in making choices are implicit rather than explicit, unconscious rather than conscious. He also stresses the basic role of affective-emotional life and of aesthetic factors in making good choices. Already Helmholtz, referring to his own experience, underlined the role of unconscious in making happy choices; he claimed that he never got a successful idea when he was at his working table.

A synthesis of the ideas concerning the representation of creativity as an alternation of choices and combinations was proposed by Hadamard (1954). More recently, Bouligand (1985) focuses on the same idea (in conflict with the common belief) that discovery and invention in mathematics are not rational acts. Like in other fields, creativity in mathematics involves intuitions, abductive inferences, imagination and revelation.

We could dress a typology of creators, according to their dominant feature. For instance, Karl Weierstrass, Bernard Riemann, Charles Hermite, Jacques Bertrand and Bertrand Russell are all mathematicians, but the first of them is predominantly analytic, the second one is predominantly intuitive, the third one is predominantly logic, while the fourth one is predominantly spatial and geometric. There is also a typology with respect to choices and combinations, according to which Riemann and Henri Poincaré were great in choices, while Paul Erdős, in the second half of the 20th century, was very inspired in combinatorial operations.

The contrast between the explicit, public appearance of science in terms of axiomatic-deductive logic, on the one hand, and the hidden life of science, dominated by questions, attempts, failures, intuition, emotion, abductive inferences, unconscious and aesthetic factors, on the other hand, is one of the main sources of the misunderstanding having among its victims the apparent impossibility to bridge heavy sciences and existential semiotics.

## **Irrationality**

“The very concept of sign may be fundamentally irrational. The sign emerges from emptiness, from Nothingness, it is a happy fortuitousness” (Tarasti 2000: 173). This is a way to state an open problem: “How do the signs emerge?” This question seems to be of the same difficulty as “How life emerged?” or as “How did the Universe start?”.



According to Peirce, signs emerge from signs and generate signs, there is no initial or final sign and any question concerning the move from non-semiosis to semiosis is ignored. Theoretically, semiosis is essentially a mediation process, in contrast with hermeneutics, which is direct, i.e., non-mediated. Professor Tarasti perhaps remembers the 1983 decade at C erisy-la-Salle, focused on a debate between semiotics (Algirdas J. Greimas) and hermeneutics (Paul Ricoeur). The difficulty to approach the delicate problem of how signs emerge is the fact that we are part of the world of signs, so we are both observers and observed in this respect. Things are similar to the difficulty to understand the time, with respect to which, again, we are both observers and observed. Tarasti is right in considering non-semiosis as an empty space, because it is not available to us and, in this case, the emergence of signs from non-signs is 'irrational'. In mathematics, irrational numbers are those whose representation is essentially infinite, so they are available only partially, via some finite approximations; in this sense, the label 'irrational' is motivated.

We reach irrational numbers only transcending the world of mathematical processes with a finite number of steps. The old Greek civilization of Pythagoras was shocked by the impossibility to measure the diagonal of the unit square and we can imagine the feeling of Nothingness associated to the respective historical moment. This first step, essentially negative, was followed by another one, positive, of plenitude, related to the creation of the concept of a real number and to the possibility to consider, for each real number, its square root. But these two moments were separated by two thousands years.

### **Transgression, as a way to acquire meaning**

When a problem is in front of us, in a given framework, a general procedure to approach it is to transgress the respective framework and to move into another one, with a more powerful explanatory capacity. For instance, art is proposing a fictional universe that may have in respect to the real one a higher capacity to mean and to explain. In his general relativity, Einstein, in order to better understand Newton's law of gravitation acting in the three-dimensional Euclidean space, considers a broader framework, a four-dimensional space-time, and he shows that gravitation in the three-dimensional space is the effect of the curvature of the space-time. From the elementary mathematics we remember that the successive extensions of the numerical framework were motivated by the need to make meaningful in the general case some natural operations; so we moved from natural numbers to integers, from integers to rational numbers and from rational to real numbers.

Solving algebraic equations required, in its turn, the extension of the framework of real numbers to a broader one, of complex (imaginary) numbers. Things don't stop here.

## **The adventure of the infinitely small**

Leibniz introduced the idea of an infinitely small, as a quantity which is fixed, but smaller than any number of the form  $1/n$ , where  $n$  is an arbitrary strictly positive integer. During about three centuries, nobody was able to give a coherent interpretation of Leibniz's idea. In the second half of the past century, A. Robinson succeeded to consider a framework more comprehensive than that of the real numbers, called the *non-standard universe*, where the idea of an infinitely small becomes meaningful, but not as a real number; it is however an element of the non-standard universe. This idea was applied to the study of exchange economy, in order to explain the behavior of the participants in a market economy, when the number of participants is increasing. The method consisted in replacing the standard universe by a non-standard one, leading so to what is called a non-standard exchange economy. One of the authors of this work, Gérard Debreu, got the Nobel prize for economics.

## **The nature of the metaphorical and of the metonymic processes**

Very often, we transgress the initial framework not in the direction of a more comprehensive one, but in the direction of a framework being in relation of analogy or of contiguity with the initial one. Metaphorical and metonymic processes are transgressions of this type.

The universe of the infinitely small (the quantum universe, for instance) takes profit from the examination of the macroscopic universe, because in the latter we can use our intuitions and our language, while in the former our capacities are to a large extent powerless. We get a better understanding of our own country by transgressing its borders and knowing other countries. We understand better the Euclidean geometry by moving to the more comprehensive framework of absolute geometry, where the axiom of parallels is ignored; so, both Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries are parts of the new framework. Similar procedures are used in practically all fields of knowledge.

## **Transcendence: high spirituality, high complexity, high surprise**

As a high form of spirituality, transcendence is a common denominator of all forms of intellectual creativity, their climax moment. But does science have a spiritual dimension? A negative answer to this question is often suggested, rarely made explicit. We meet frequently slogans of the type: "science deals only with the concrete, material world", "modern science dehumanizes man", "science provides us with information, but brings

about no spiritual gain". Such slogans are simply false, they denote ignorance or/and misunderstanding. At the Imatra 2005 session of semiotics we have lectured about the spiritual dimension of mathematics. Some meetings are organized under the slogan "Bridging science and spirituality". It is suggested in this way that science and spirituality are to such extent away each other that we need to build a bridge between them, in order to diminish their discrepancy. The reality is just the opposite. Science has a very rich internal spiritual life and this fact explains why it is able to interact with other spiritual fields.

In our Western culture, we refer to old Greek traditions, where chronologically myths appeared the first, then appeared literature (see Homer) and a few centuries later emerged mathematics, with Thales and Pythagoras.

### **Poetry and mathematics, daughters of the same mother**

They are usually described in contrastive terms; however, they share some important features, inherited from myths: they all propose some fictional worlds; they all use symbolization; they all need to transgress the everyday logic and to adopt, more or less explicitly, what we call today a non-classical logic; as a consequence, they all are impregnated of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic paradoxes. So, the way is open to conflicts with the intuitive perception and expectations and to discrepancies between the intelligible and the visible. Myths, poetry and mathematics are all based on a principle of semiotic optimization: maximum of meaning in the shortest possible expression. They also share the assumption of a holographic principle: the local may account sometimes for the global, the instantaneous may account for the eternal, the anthropos for the cosmos, the individual for the general, the finite for the infinite. Recall William Blake's famous verses: "To see the world in a grain of sand/and the heaven in a wild flower./Hold infinity in the palm of your hand/and eternity in an hour". Infinity is one of the most important forms of transcendence, involving a whole hierarchy: the finite accounting for the infinite, the countable infinite accounting for the infinite of the power of the continuum, the infinite of a given cardinality accounting for the infinite of a higher cardinality.

### **Imprecision is essential in both scientific and artistic creativity**

A symptom of the high complexity associated with transcendence is the essential role of imprecision in all kinds of spiritual creativity. This fact is well-known in the case of poetry and art, but less known in the case of science. However, at a careful examination, we

observe that most mathematical results involve approximation, randomness, fuzziness, generality, negligibility, ambiguity, roughness or other forms of imprecision. As a matter of fact, the distinctive feature of imprecision is just its high complexity: the number of parameters that should be evaluated is too large to can be performed.

### **Surprise, as a common feature of science and of art**

From high spirituality and complexity there is only one step to high surprise. Let us take the Greek wonder faced with the existence of the phenomenon of irrationality. The surprise was so high that its effect was decisive for Greek mathematics. We could dress a hierarchy of facts with respect to their degree of surprise: trivial; obvious, but not trivial; expected, but not obvious; neuter (neither expected, nor unexpected); unexpected, but not surprising; surprising, but within the limits of human imagination; beyond what can be imagined at a certain historical moment.

### **From surprise to craziness, in both science and art**

The last type could be associated with a kind of craziness, in its positive sense (in contrast with its negative, pathological meaning). Marston Morse writes somewhere that mathematics is sometimes crazy. Perhaps, he had in view moments such as Abel's discovery of the impossibility to solve by radicals algebraic equations of degree higher than 4 and Galois' theorem giving the deep purely qualitative reason of this fact. We may also think at non-Euclidean geometries and at Gödel's incompleteness theorem asserting the impossibility to have, for some types of formal systems, both consistency and completeness. Robinson's non-standard analysis could be also included in these types of scientific results, we could call them crazy, meaning by this that they pushed far away the limits of human imagination. "Transcendence" is associated with "beyond"; with results of the mentioned type, human spirituality is moving beyond some already accepted limits. By Gödel's incompleteness theorem, for instance, we learn that in order to prove the consistency of some types of formal systems we need to leave the respective systems and reach a more comprehensive universe, whose consistency will require a new, broader universe etc. Going beyond an existing framework is thus a human need telling us how essential is the 'trans' operator having transcendence as its prototype.

## **Existence and its typology; what defines us as humans**

Our stress on heavy sciences is motivated by the fact that they are considered a field of the object rather than one of the subject. We argued however in favor of a strong involvement of the subject in the so-called heavy sciences too and we used ideas belonging to all fields of spiritual creativity. We stressed the psychological identity of scientific and of artistic creativity, the similar role of illumination, of irrationality and of transcendence in science and in art. There exists however a whole typology of existence, according to its nature and to its degree of effectiveness. For instance, if we refer to the existence of the human body, we have first its material existence (related to the verb 'to have') consisting of some atoms. The most visible, material existence is also the most inconsistent, because during five years all our atoms are changed. More stable is its structural existence (related to the verb 'to be'), consisting of the patterns, the arrangements of the atoms. The genetic existence (associated to the verb 'to inherit') consists of the features transferred from our parents and ancestors. The reproductive and sexual existence (associated with the verb 'to transfer to descendants') consists of the capacity to have children; the managerial existence (associated with the verb 'to control' or 'to coordinate') is of three types, according to the nature of prostheses under control: muscular, sensorial and cerebral. The most important cerebral prosthesis is the electronic computer, leading to the computational existence (associated with the verb 'to do something effectively'), consisting of the capacity to make our products as constructive as possible. Here, we should distinguish the complexity (cost) of doing something. Very important is the interactive existence (associated with the verb 'to interact'), consisting of the interactions of our body with the external world. Here we should include the ecological existence and the communicational existence, as parts of our interactive (dynamical) existence. Then comes the semiotic existence (associated with the verb 'to mean', 'to signify'), consisting of the capacity to mean in various ways; this existence is one of the second order, because it consists of the capacity to signify the other, already considered types of existence. The procedures to mean may be of various types, for instance they may be symbolic, iconic (metaphorical) or indexical (metonymic). There is a whole history of the metaphorical use of the human body in the Greek antiquity, during the Roman empire, in the Middle Age, until our time.

No claim to have given a complete account of the types of existence of the human body. Our desire was only to suggest the complexity of the problem. But even from this incomplete account we learn to what extent the existence of the human body cannot be understood in absence of reference to what is beyond it. From this apparently elementary problem there is a long way until we reach the idea of the existence (identity) of a person, with its mind, soul and spirit. Leibniz, with his famous mind/body problem, is challenging

us still today and we realize the high complexity of the idea of self, of 'ego' and of 'human existence'. All these things are common to science and to art, they define us as humans.

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## Recovering the Logic in Semiotics in Reflexive Anthropology

Geoffrey Ross Owens

*(Acknowledgements: The following document represents a revised and expanded version of "Recovering the Logic in Semiotics in Reflexive Anthropology," presented at the 38<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Semiotic Society of America in October of 2013. I want to thank the Legas Publishing Company, and Drs. Jamin Pelky and Leonard Sbrocchi, editors of the Yearbook of the SSA, for granting me permission to publish an expanded version of the essay. The author takes responsibility for any omissions, errors or lapses in sound reasoning reflected in this article.)*

### Abstract

Historically, the term ethnography has simultaneously represented both method and theoretical output of the discipline of anthropology. The concept has proven so powerful that it has been extensively incorporated into other disciplines, and defined in diverse ways, ranging from a detailed descriptions of small group dynamics (Pringle 1994; Fleming 2013), to a broad overview of the human impact on a terrain as a general introduction to the study of other kinds of ecological, biological or mineralogical resources in that terrain (Olsen, et. al. 1992). Yet, while other disciplines have increasingly acknowledged ethnography's utility for both documenting and comprehending cultural diversity, anthropology itself has taken a more reflexive turn that calls into question fundamental assumptions about the aims and scope of the ethnography, and even its relevance in an ever changing world. Those who call into ethnography into question, as well as those who envision creative ways to reinvigorate the discipline of anthropology, consider their critiques to have been built upon ethnography's semiotic underpinnings. What we seem to have lost sight of is the idea that ethnography's efficacy as an explanatory model draws from its role as a sign—or more specifically, an argument—that links the ethnographer's humanistic experience in the field to the discipline's scientific/theoretical output. This article explores the nature of ethnography in light of Pierce's premise that semiotics serves as vehicle for comprehending both human interaction and the natural universe, going beyond suggestions that knowledge can and must only be resolved into assertions of authority or power.

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While anthropologists can and have studied the gamut human configuration, stretching from individual biography (Radin 1926; Narayan 1989) to such broad questions as the origins of agriculture or civilization (Netting 1990), there is general consensus that ethnographic research starts with a peculiar kind of microsociology—systematic investigations of small groups of individuals and careful recording and analysis of the minutiae of their social interactions—what Malinowsky referred to as ‘imponderabilia of actual life’ (1922: 18). Scholars such as LeCompte and Schensul have referred to the ethnographic method as using the researcher him/herself as “the primary tool for data collection” (LeCompte and Schensul 1999: 2). It is expected that the ethnographer become intimately familiar with the subjects in the community of interest through spending a great deal of time with them. Another implied, though not always fulfilled, obligation is that the ethnographer not only systematically record the everyday imponderabilia, but also actively participate in activities, rituals and conversations just like anyone who has actually grown up in the community. This long term meddling in a community not only distinguishes anthropology from journalism, ecology-inspired “duck blind” field observations or demographic analysis, but also enables the ethnographer to, as it were, mimic the manner in which actual members of the culture became adept at it. In other words, unless we are studying a Christian community or aspire to one of the higher Hindu *Varnas*, we cannot be expect to be born again and learn the culture as children who grew up in that culture. But can do the next best thing, and learn by “doing” culture just as everyone else has done throughout his or her childhood (cf. Funnel and Smith 1981).

This research methodology, utilizing the gregariousness of the ethnographer as principal research instrument—or, as Rosaldo put it, the trope of the ‘lone anthropologist’ (1989: 30-31), results in an approach that is deeply personal, perspectival and individualistic. The ethnographer sojourns unaccompanied into the field, submitting her/himself to the slings and arrows of trial and error, as well as the compassion and patience of individuals willing to tolerate such an interloper. As Paul Stoller has suggested (1989: 4-9), this individualistic field experience begins with a ‘sensual openness’ to sounds, sights, tastes and smells that envelopes and at times overwhelms the senses. With gradual habituation to this situation—together with ever increasing linguistic and cognitive command of the speech, gestures and dexterity of our hosts, these direct stimulations from the surrounding environment gradually give way to a higher order comprehension of the situation in we have surrounded ourselves – the beginnings of experience; or what we may call semiosis (cf. Deely 1982: 94-98). Ideally, only when we’ve moved on from sensation to experience to understanding of a geographically specific or socially self-identifying group, we are then given license to ponder over how our favorite group’s shared, socially learned knowledge, beliefs or patterns of behavior (i.e. culture) furnishes us with lessons on what it means to be human in all times and places.

While anthropologists have claimed this brand of cultural immersion as the distinctive method of their discipline, there is generally one other unavoidable requirement before you can consider yourself an anthropologist. After all, we anthropologists have all heard stories of individuals “going native,” settling into a community, and never returning to the institutions that sent them (Ewing 1994). While this may reflect a near total mastery of the nuances of the culture, what is the good of such total immersion for the furthering of our collective understanding of humanity? A true anthropologist must approach, perhaps build bridges, but never completely cross, the chasm represented by total immersion into another culture. Our aim is to stand at its precipice, and subsequently bring these experiences back home. Our ethnographic endeavor is not considered complete until we report back to the community that sent us, about what was learned in the field. For many in fact, ethnography *is* this written account, more so than the process of data gathering (Sanjek 1990; Emerson, et. al. 1995; Ellen 1984). And little wonder, since the final product holds fast to the Greek etymology of the word *ethnography*: “a writing about a people.” It is additionally implied that, in some sense, ethnography informs us, refers back to, or represents that we commonly refer to as a “culture,”—something that exists in ‘the field,’ (Owens 2003: 122), but reaching beyond an aggregate of individuals and their modal behavior. A culture is not experienced directly; rather, its existence can be inferred by comparisons and contrasts to other entities called culture documented by previous anthropologists.

So how does Peirce figure into this way of viewing culture? As ethnographers, we take pride, even make pretense to authority, through our direct and deeply personal access to a community somewhere in the world. What is more, our job is incomplete, or at least remains latent, until these experiences are transformed and presented for an audience removed from those first-hand experiences. As Peirce noted in his article ‘On a New List of Categories’ (1867), for conceptions to arise, two things must take place. First of all, as humans navigate in their world, they are bombarded with sensuous perceptions that command attention: though these attention-grabbing experiences direct the mind toward an object, they cannot of themselves truly be considered conceptions until they become associated with some pre-existing quality that connects them categorically to other conceptions. This insight is that it parallels the model used by anthropologists to describe worldview (cf. Hiebert 2008). As the member of a given culture does not perceive the world as a random hodgepodge of experiences, but tends to see the world as making sense, experiences sometimes viewed as boring and repetitive, even though no two experiences are quite alike. That is because as we go through our experiences, we incorporate each new one into our cognitive “map” of reality, lumping experiences together into broad categorical knowledge.

By making comparisons between cultures and the categories into which they sort their experiences, the ethnographer is engaging in an activity not unlike members of a community. Thus, the Nuer engage in something that we call politics, in spite of the absence of a government that many Westerners feel is an essential component of political action (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Americans engage in kinship, without benefit of having

that special relationship with their mother's brothers that is so indispensable to family systems throughout the world (Radcliffe-Brown 1924; Schneider 1968). In this basic sense, the ethnography incorporates these previously unfamiliar experiences gained through fieldwork into broader, gradually more familiar sign categories, making the ethnographer a mediator, or perhaps his/her ethnography an interpretant, to the cultural object and its representamen. I find it no coincidence that Peirce also thought of signs as having a thirdness to them—there is the object, the representamen and interpretant (Pierce c.1897-1902). Likewise, ethnography seems to involve a three-part process, which can be described as data gathering, analysis and theory building—or, put another way, individual experience, the gradual reorientation of the ethnographer's worldview to align with the people with whom he/she is collaborating, and finally writing up; thereby offering answers to broader questions posed by a community of engaged scholars throughout the world.

In discussing various ways in which ethnographic fieldwork entails a kind of semiosis, I wholeheartedly admit that I am not offering a radical revision of past scholars' portrayals of ethnography. Anthropologists have long been influenced by the linguistic model of semiotics developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (c. 1906-1911). Because Saussure's theories were more narrowly focused on linguistic signs (de Wall 2013: 75), and language represents a basic human capacity found in cultures in all times and places, it has long been assumed that extralinguistic human activities are shaped by, or analogous to, this critical feature of the manner in which the human mind interfaces with its environment (Whorf 1941). Clifford Geertz (1973) thought of culture as being like a text—a "thick" one at that, and thus we are engaging in a very elaborate decoding operation of various signs analogous to the kinds of operations with which sociolinguists are familiar. Sociolinguistics note that signs spill out beyond the simple concepts and sound images—not only are linguistic signs themselves influenced by other signaling activities taking place beyond the scope of language, but words 'do things' thus muddling the distinction between language and social action (Austin 1962). Likewise, Levi-Strauss attempted to use distinctive feature theory to infer the existence of elementary building blocks of myth, or the cultural classification of food and kinship (Levi-Strauss 1955) it was considered analogous, but not identical, with language. Thus, cultural description was viewed as a text referring to other texts, and over the years, a number of theorists have used metaphors or analogies borrowed from linguistics to explain the goals of the ethnographer, portraying ethnography as a form of 'reading,' 'translation' or exegesis of culture (Leinhardt 1954: 97-98; Beattie 1964: 89; Asad 1986).

One of the consequences of this idea that ethnography is analogous to language is a debate that exploded during the 1980s, and continues to reverberate in what is still portrayed as a "crisis of representation" within the discipline (Marcus and Fischer 1999). If ethnography is a kind of text, referring in some manner to other texts or discourses occurring among some community somewhere in the world, and directed toward a literate, even scholarly audience that acts as consumer of such texts in some Western

educational context, then to what extent, if any, are we dealing with an authentic, directly accessible culture when reading an ethnography for the first time (Fish 1980)? According to James Clifford, author of the introduction of the now noted edited volume *Writing Culture* (1986: 6), “ethnographic writing is determined in at least six ways:”

(1) contextually (it draws from and creates meaningful social milieu); (2) rhetorically (it uses and is used by expressive conventions) (3) institutionally (one writes within and against, specific traditions, disciplines, audiences); (4) generically (an ethnography is usually distinguishable from a novel or a travel account); (5) politically (the authority to represent cultural realities is unequally shared and at times contested); (6) historically (all the above conventions and constraints are changing).

Thus, ethnography is deemed a “fiction”— Not necessarily a falsehood, but a cobbling together of rhetorical devices aimed at enticing the consumer of ethnographic texts into trusting the authority of the ethnographer to speak of, and perhaps on behalf of, those who possess something we refer to as culture. Ethnographic truths are, in Clifford’s view, “inherently partial—committed and incomplete” (1986: 7).

There have been many critiques of the *Writing Culture* debate of the late 80s and early 90s. Perhaps the most poignant set of critiques is that the claim “ethnography is a ‘partial truth’” is itself partial. As Graham Watson pointed (1991: 81), this assertion assumes that there is a whole truth out there somewhere, which is not necessarily something that even the most rigidly scientifically-minded anthropologist is prepared to admit, being aware of the hermeneutics of nearly all knowledge. There is also a general sense that the general emphasis on the rhetorical qualities of the written ethnography is somewhat lopsided—that the discussion of how best to create a more transparent ethnography through unfiltered dialogue, poetry, personal reflections of the fieldworker leaves the basic question unanswered of how this final product relates to the experiences of the community it purports to portray. Most sensible adults can recognize already that when they hold on to a copy of *The Nuer*, they are not actually grasping in their hands a group of people of the Southern Sudan. But this observation needn’t lead us to see the Nuer as mere subjective constructs either (Deely 1982: 96).

Overlooked in the whole debate in the 1980s and 90s is a piece of folk wisdom passed from mentor to student within anthropology, but not always clearly codified in the plethora of written guides to ethnographic research over the past century. Ethnography, almost from its inception, was understood to be, first and foremost, an argument—or at least an argument or arguments must be embedded within its cultural descriptions. There is a common a misunderstanding, on the part of anthropologists and non-anthropologist alike, that ethnography is largely a descriptive narrative, rather than a generative process aimed at developing new knowledge. While Pierce is respected among anthropologists for, among other reasons, his anticipating the linguistic theories of Saussure. But by not limiting his semiotics to linguistic signs, he has bequeathed to us

an explanatory model that reaches beyond both mere description, but also beyond the tyranny of formal logical models that stifle rather than expand our capacity to understand the nature of humanity and the universe we occupy.

Pierce thought of an argument as a symbolic legisign capable of allowing the object to affect its interpretant. In formal logic, the ultimate goal is the syllogism: propositions leading to a conclusion. Pierce's logic was more diverse in what it sought, spanning from what he referred to as speculative grammar to inductive and deductive reasoning. Though we now know that other living organisms are capable of semiotically analyzable communication, Peirce's statement of the primacy of the human mind in processing symbols still resonates within cultural anthropology. As Peirce stated: "The symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist." This is because associations between symbols and their respective objects and interpretants are established prior to and exterior to the individual. The existence of so-called 'natural signs' suggests that some signs have autonomy from the human capacity to generate them. This observation protects us from the temptation of viewing experience as mere solipsism, or as the dream of Brahma—an imagined reality generated by the machinations of the powerful. Symbols, not to mention legisigns, also depend to some extent on preexisting recognition of their properties as signs.

There may be a nearly unlimited number of arguments that potentially could be made—hence, we think of the goal of argument ultimately as generating new knowledge, including questioning existing assumptions in an iconoclastic way. A classic example of this new thinking is Margaret Mead's calling into question whether there existed a male or female temperament cross-culturally, or whether adolescence, with its accompanying anxious tension, is a necessary phase through which all human beings must pass (Mead 1928; 1935). There are many instances in which the breaking up of the linguistic universe is finite, as in the case of such things as basic color terms, number systems, ideas of direction or first or second person pronouns (cf. Berlin and Kay 1969). Each can be distilled into finite sets of rules that govern what kinds of numbers, colors or directions can be discerned within a given linguistic community. Likewise, there may be a plethora of arguments, but they often share commonalities that overlap in different communities. This is what makes cultures learnable, and enables us to communicate something of the qualities of that culture to an audience removed from those experiences.

A legisign is a sign that is a law because, as Peirce has described it, "This law is usually established by men. It is not a single object, but a general type which, it has been agreed shall be significant." The law that Peirce presents as characteristic of arguments may be compared to what Stephen Toulmin called the 'warrant' of an argument: the general rule of which an argument is but a specific example (1958 87 ff.). Peirce in a similar vein said, "every legisign signifies through an instance of its application." Thus, argument can produce new ideas, but through a finite set of operations previously established by humans. Is it possible that arguing represents a kind of intellectual

imperialism? After all, the various species of arguments may fall into a finite number of forms that connect the premises to their conclusions. An objection might be raised that the finite nature of arguments may choke off human creativity. This is not to suggest that non-Western people think in non-rational ways; when I was in Tanzania, people loved to debate about culture amongst themselves, offering eloquent and intellectually thought-provoking explanations for why their culture operated as it did. Some of my deepest understandings of the workings of culture came from such debates. Thus, it is possible to utilize our recognition and diversity of cultural expression throughout the world to present an ever expanding group of arguments, while at the same time knowing that this plethora of arguments might themselves be made possible by a finite number of warrants graspable by the discerning mind.

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# **A Socio- religious Analysis of Indigenous Drums in Olojo Festival in the sustenance of the King's Leadership role among the Ile-ife people**

Olusegun Oladosu

## **Abstract.**

The Yoruba people acknowledge the usage of drum for cultural and religious functions. These functions also influences the emotional aspect of their beliefs and practices. Drumming is seen as an action which portrays their identity and life style. These actions are shown in the acts of celebrations and worships where it plays a significant part in the collective socio-cultural experiences of the people as it reveals the pulse and their inner feelings. It also serves as instrumentation which could enhance the deity and their adherents to the level of spiritual ecstasy. Among the Yoruba the drum can be identified as holding deeper symbolic and historical meanings as it adds accompaniment for any manner of ceremony –births, deaths, marriages- together with a ritual dance. This usage is embedded with human, natural and spiritual formations which create leadership value for the people. This work will look at the use of *osirigi* and *agree* drums from these formational aspects by analysing usage through semiotic and phenomenological frame works.

## **Introduction**

Festivals in Yorubaland represent the climax of public worship, as they manifest themselves through both oral expression and actions. A festival is at the centre of activities where devotees commit themselves to the care of the *òrìṣà*[or Yoruba divinities]. The devotees also use this period to show their gratitude both in word and dance to the divinities.From invocation to dismissal (Vidal,2012:201), it is noteworthy that communication is indispensable to the interaction that occurs between devotees, the society and the *òrìṣà*. This communicative interaction includes music and drumming as a

mode of enacting a divine worship. The process of enactment requires particular drums to be played for such festival occasions. The effect of the drum is to stimulate ritual activities and also to sensitize worshippers during the stages of trance and frenzied mood attached to the festival activities (Vidal,2012:200).These traditional drums also possesses politico-religious significance which strengthens the leadership authority of the king of Ile-Ife. This paper looks at the socio-religious activities of Yoruba indigenous drums in the Olojo festival and its political value attached to the sacredness of the authority which the king wields over his subjects. The aim of this article will be to look at the major socio-religious importance of the drum among the Ile-Ife people,and the drum's critical role in maintaining not only the integrity of the sacred performances, but also the leadership and control enjoyed by the sacred kingship within Ile - Ife society. The festival serves as the vehicle through which to achieve these fundamental objectives.

### **Origins of the Olojo Festival in Ile-Ife**

Olójó is a communal festival attached to the worship of Ògún in Ilé-Ifè. The festival is meant to commemorate Ògún, the god of iron, and Òrànmiyàn, who was said to be the son of Ògún and Oduduwa. Oduduwà was recognised as the mythical ancestor of the Yoruba. From oral traditions, it was noted that Ògún is the Yoruba òrìṣà of war. He is one of the earliest divinities. He was a hunter; and before the earth was formed, he used to descend by a spider's web upon the primordial marshy waste for the purpose of hunting (Idowu, 1996:84). He was said to be one of the immemorial beings (*Oòyè*) who descended from Olódùmarè along with other divinities like Ọbàtálá and other òrìṣà (Oladapo, 1980:104). He was a warrior designated to pave the way for the other, less war-like deities who followed. His invaluable services and commitments to humanity compelled the Yoruba to remember, and memorialize him through ritual at least once a year until this very day. His service therefore led Ògún to be given the honorific title of "Owner of the Day" (Olójó) as he was the one that paved the way for other 'òrìṣàs' or gods.

Òrànmiyàn was an Ile-Ife prince and a warlord who later founded the Oyo and Benin Kingdoms. He was said to have been conceived through a cross-sex meeting of two deities over a slave woman known as Lakange Anihunka (a slave captured by Ògún in one of his war expeditions). The deities involved were Oduduwà and Ògún himself. Ògún slept with the woman upon returning from his war trip to Ilé-Ifè, but unbeknownst to him, the woman was already betrothed to Oduduwà. When Ògún came to confess to what he had done, it was too late to stop Oduduwa from marrying her.

The woman later gave birth to a child who had one side of his body fair and the other dark. The fair skin was Oduduwa's and the dark skin was Ògún's. This image of the child then gave rise the saying *òrò-ló-yàn* which may mean "the child is very unusual" or 'the child has become explicitly unnatural or "my prayers have been answered". This saying then depicts the name of the deity Òrànmiyàn until today, and at the same time reveals the cultural model of gift of a child in an extraordinary way (*ifà lòmọ*) which is

always emphasised in Yoruba parlance. This parlance identifies the belief that people live out the meanings of their names. The philosophy of naming among the Yoruba is expressed in common saying that “ *ilé ni à ñ wò kí átó so omo lórúko*” (one must consider the tradition and history of a child’s relatives when choosing a name). This tradition of naming is a long standing tradition and practice among Yoruba families and such customs often reference their sacred stories, beliefs and the vocations associated with the family. This model therefore indicates the symbolic importance of Ogun and Oduduwa in the creation of Oranmiyan, most importantly that the child represented a gain for Oduduwa, who outsmarted Ogun through his authority as king. The Olojo festival has a display of colour symbols which brings to mind this mythical story that connects Oranmiyan with Ogun and Oduduwa. The image of fair and black colours which Oranmiyan was born with is also reflected in the ritual dress of the Lokolokos every year during the festival (see plate 2). The image also symbolises the reminiscence of the picture of Oranmiyan in every Olojo festival.



Plate 2: The Lokoloko team wearing the colour symbol of Oranmiyan during Olojo festival

When Ọ̀rànmíyàn grew up as a prince, the festival of Ọ̀lójó was inaugurated by him to venerate Ọ̀gún. He himself also became associated with the festival because he was as warlike as Ọ̀gún, his partial father. The festival thus also served as an annual festival for every king enthroned in Ilé-Ifẹ̀ from the time of Ọ̀rànmíyàn to the present day. The Ọ̀lójó festival occurs annually in the month of October.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Michael Halliday semiotic method as cited by Adeosun will be utilised in the course of this work. This method emphasises the importance of context, both context of situation and context of culture, in reconstructing the meaning of a text (Adeosun, 2013:91). It views language as the embodiment of the social process in a society through the use of symbols and signs. This method would be relevant because Yoruba language is context dependent.

It shows that context is very important in the understanding of the symbol and sign. Halliday's method also takes cognizance of shared meanings among users of the signs, and decodes such signs primarily from their worldview. Thus, this paper will identify how drums express religious and cultural ideas and feelings through symbols and signs. Phenomenological methods will also be engaged to interrogate relevant tradition and to facilitate an understanding of the essence of the indigenous drum in the festival.

### History of Òsírìgì, the Indigenous Drum in Ile-Ife

Daramola,(2001:144-147) wrote that Fabunmi traces the origin of Òsírìgì to the original inhabitants of Ilé-Ifè. The history, asserts that the drum originally belonged to 'Orìṣàtèkò (an important figure in ancient pre-dynastic Ife), as part of the revolution that accompanied the development of the institution of the Ọ̀nì as a dynasty. But that it was taken by force. It shows that the seizure of the Òsírìgì drum from its original custodian took place during a war led by Ọ̀rànmíyàn, founder of the dynasties in Benin and Oyo and child of Ogun and Oduduwa, who was reputed to have been originally an Ile- Ife prince. The drum was confiscated, and a musician called Omítótó was appointed to play it at the palace under the supervision of a high-chief called Ọ̀bàlọ̀ràn. The drum was brought to the palace from Ilode Quarters (Ọ̀bàlọ̀ràn's base) on a daily basis for performance. The drum, therefore, became the possession of the Ile- Ife Court while its music began to be solely used on state occasions and for important 'national' festivals like Ọ̀lọ̀jọ̀, Edì and Ọ̀rùngbẹ. Another version of the story describes the Òsírìgì and other drums as princes of Ọ̀lọ̀fin that used to make Ọ̀lọ̀fin happy on every occasion. After the death of these princes, it then became a custom to beat the drum for every succeeding Ọ̀lọ̀fin or Ọ̀nì to identify the presence of the princes in all occasions that involve the king.

Daramola also noted that the linkage of Òsírìgì with the personages and festivals mentioned above confirms that the music has a primordial origin in Ile -Ife traditions (plate 4.8). The drum emerged as an indigenous music and developed to become part of the paraphernalia of office in the court of the Ọ̀nì of Ife. It is a traditional royal music played for the Ọ̀nì and the Ìsòrò chiefs in Ile- Ife (Ologundudu, 2008:160).

The òsírìgì which is the drum of the Ọ̀nì is the traditional drum attached to the festival of Olojo(see plate 1). Also àgèrẹ̀, otherwise known as Keregidi, is another drum which Ọ̀nì must dance to during this festival (see plate 5). Òsírìgì is the drum of the first Ọ̀lọ̀fin, the first king of Ile-Ife kingdom. Before Ọ̀lọ̀jọ̀ could take place, the drum must be unveiled with sacrifice. The drum must be worshipped.



Plate 1: The Òsírìgì drummer enclosing the sacred door.

Source: the researcher. 26/10/ 2012.

Omisakin, the Obalufe of Irewo (a royal father) explained the usage of this drum in different dimensions (Omisakin, 2013). He described the drum as “a natural royal drum” which belongs to Oòduà the mythical ancestor of the Yoruba. He noted that when Odùduwà arrived at Ife, he brought along twenty one (21) drums but òsírìgì was the leading drum among the rest. The drum has no replica within Yoruba tradition, as it is a peculiar drum used in the worship of the deities. It is not used willy-nilly, nor during just any festival. The òsírìgì drummers are traditionally endowed, and their stewardship to the king is established by the family genealogy. The tradition of the drum must be passed from one generation to the other by inheritance. It is noted that certain caution must be followed in the usage of the drum. The drum must only be beaten during a royal engagement. It is used, for example, to announce bereavement within the palace. It is also used for prayer and blessing. It is used for warning. The most peculiar attributes of the òsírìgì drummer is that they know how to beat the panegyric (*oriki*) of each chief that surrounded the king.

It must be noted that indigenous drums are highly sacrosanct and sacred among the African people. This is real among the Yoruba because it usually appeals to their consciousness. In several ways, it showcase the ability of the people in their consciousness shift as it creates within the environment the mood of spirituality through ritual performance. It also serve as sacred symbols of the ruler’s office because through it, the sanctity of the office of the African rulers are maintained. Mbiti (1991,163) established this when he explain that “ many symbols are used in connection with the office of the (African) rulers. Examples are.....the use of sceptres as symbol of authority, and royal drums which symbolize their ability to communicate with the people.” In this category as well, is the use of bata and koso ( types of indigenous drum in Oyo) drum in the palace of Alaafin of Oyo (Johnson, 1976,58). The function of the two drums is to wake the king’s up every morning at 4.a.m.. This then signify a call to duty as we have the symbolic citation of the national anthem attached to the flag of any country. The implication of the seizure or silence of such indigenous drum means the authority of the ruler of such community or tribe would have been disengaged or probably such ruler

is deceased and the community is in a state of mourning as it is also the case when the flag of any country is lower down during the period of bereavement.

### **Socio-Religious Analysis of the Drums in Ọlójó Festival and Its Leadership and Cultural Connotation**

Ademakinwa Adereti (2012:11) quoting Omigbule shows that the timing of the festival depends on the movement of the sun from West to East. This timing is done with the *cola* divination, which is the responsibility of Chief Eredumi, the chief priest of Ọ̀rànmíyàn. The festival is held in honour of Ogun, and it is observed for four days. The first day, which is Friday, is known as '*ilagun*' and involves the sacrifice and presentation of animal and other materials at the shrine. A dog, snails, palm oil, fowls, kola nuts, palm-wine and a special sacrificial provision provided in a small pot (*orù*) by the king, are given to Osògún (chief priest of Ọlójó), The priest who, along with his aides are known as *Àmurùn*, proceed gently towards the shrine without looking back (plates 3-4). The pot and the materials must be guided to the shrine safely. During the procession, the following chants are recited:

*Ògún gborí ọ̀rá gbùrèfẹ*      Ọ̀gún received the head ọ̀rá got the remnant

*Oo gborí, orí ògún fi* (Oladapo, 2013)      He takes the head



Plate 3: Osogun priest at the palace waiting for the ritual materials during Olojo festival at Ife.

Source: the researcher. 26/10/ 2012



Plate 4: Àmurùn Ogun with the ritual materials during Olojo festival.

Source: the author. 26/10/ 2012.

The climax of the festival takes place on a Saturday when the king wears his 'Are' crown to the shrine. A common belief among the people is that this is the day when the ancestors awaken to join the celebration. In the procession, the Ọ̀ṣẹ̀ni moves to Ọ̀gún's shrine amidst the jubilation of the participants. It is at this juncture that the sacred drum of the Ọ̀ṣẹ̀ni begins to play its critical role in the ritual.

The importance of the drum to the Ọ̀ṣẹ̀ni in Ọ̀lójó festival is critical. Àyà̀n, the deity of the drum, was considered to be the wife of the first Ọ̀lójó: Ọ̀ṣẹ̀ni of Ife. Her responsibility as wife was to continually praise her husband the king. So, in terms of praises and social dedication, the drum's purpose in the palace is to offer her praises. It was after the demise of Àyà̀n, that a male drummer now plays the drum for the king. This is because the drum must be where the king (*Ọ̀lójó*) is. It is at this point that the special drumlike ò̀sírìgì, along with the common ones (*dùndún*), represent a critical component of the religious tradition of Ọ̀ṣẹ̀ni.

Ò̀sírìgì drummers must announce the emergence of the Oni with the 'arè' crown. They will move to the sacred door from which the Ọ̀ṣẹ̀ni will emerge and they must usher the king out with a particular song (plates 1 & 5).





Plate 5: The sacred door in the palace where the king (Ọ̀ni) will emerge.

Source: the researcher. 26/10/ 2012.

The following is the song they will sing seven times while parading around the premises of the palace. After the seventh circumambulation, the king will emerge. The song goes thus:

<i>Òdé tó o</i>	It is time for outing
<i>Òdé dèrè</i>	Good outing
<i>Mo bọba re a ọ̀sìn</i>	I must follow the king on Ọ̀sìn outing
<i>Òdé tó o</i>	It is time for outing
<i>Síjúadé olúbùṣe</i>	Sijuade the son of Olubuse
<i>Òdé tó o</i>	It is time for outing
<i>Ọ̀lọ̀dún mi sọ̀dún</i>	Everyone celebrates their festival
<i>Olósù mosù</i>	Everyone knows their period of joy
<i>Òdé tó o</i>	It is time for outing.

The *àgèrẹ̀* the hunter's drum, also known as *keregidi* among the Ifa worshipers of the Ife people, is an Ifá version of indigenous drum which is beaten during Ifá festival. The

drum is stationed inside the palace and it is beaten only on the day of Ọlójó festival. The sacredness attached to this drum is that it must be beaten by an old man of at least (70) seventy years or above. The drummer must sit while beating the drum. It is this drum that the king must first dance to while he is inside the palace's court before showing himself to the mammoth crowd. This is considered as a spiritual and religious exercise. This is so because all the 'ìsòrò' (the palace chief) and the *lókólóko* (the palace messengers) must be at this dancing forum of the king (Akinyemi,2012)( see plate 6).After the exercise, the king will now be ushered out through an age-old sacred door which must be opened with the sound of òsírìgì drum(plate 5).



Plate 6: Ifá version of àgèrè beaten by elderly drummers during Ọlójó festival.

Source: the researcher, 28/10/ 2011

The ritual connection of the drum to Ọlójó festival is both symbolic and mythical. The sound and beating of òsírìgì symbolize the presence of Àyàn, the wife of Ọlófin at the festival. This indicates that Àyàn is ever loyal to any reigning Ọ̀nì on the throne. Mythically, it underlines the fact that the Ọ̀nì, being in a joyous mood, revalidates his allegiance to God, the deities and his deceased ancestors. This he did to strengthen his political authority over the throne. Òsírìgì is thus seen as a symbol of completeness, perfection and symbolizes a bridal function for all deities. This is clearly shown in the song explained above. The lyric of the song is of a woman calling her husband out on a special social occasion or appointment. This voice, the king must honour after the call has been done seven times. The voice also serves as general announcement to the attendant at the festival to show that the king is prepared for his ritual visit to the shrine of Ogun.

The òsírìgì also functions as a kind of ecological ritual. The drum, according to Daramola (2001), is related and understood in the light of the Yoruba belief about 'the four corners of the world' (*ìgun méréìn ayé*) which represent the four cardinal points believed to be the pillars that uphold the universe and make it a complete or 'perfect'

planet for human habitation. This premise is based on the musical instruments in the ensemble, which include the òsírìgì drum and three metal gongs: *kónkóló*, *agbe* and *ojo*. This ensemble symbolizes the traditional Yoruba experience that the number 'four' is a sacred number, expressed through instrumentation and ritual.

In another sense, this is also connected to the activities of 'Ogún who is being celebrated through the festival as the pathfinder for the deities. This connection, therefore, brings to fore the fact that Ilé-Ifè is connected to the belief which qualifies the city as the "dawn of days" (*Ibi ojúmọ́ ti mọ́ wá*). This according to Samuel Johnson (1976,15) shows that "Ile-Ife is fabled as the spot where God created man, white and black, and from whence they dispersed all over the earth." But meanwhile the Yoruba myth stated that during the expedition of the of the four principal Yoruba deities (Orunmila, Obatala, Ogun and Esu) , it was Ogun that was given the qualities of pathfinders and he could do this through his hunting skills and this helped him to locate the route in a spot known as Ife and hence label the spot as an ancestral land with the appellation " dawn of days" . This identifies the fact that other human generation also took their queue from this route. The symbolic uses of this drum, therefore, establish this ecological fact.

The symbolic use of òsírìgì identifies the pledge of loyalty of Oṣoni to his ancestors. It indicates an expression of spiritual mediation during the festival. This recognition, in the opinion of Daramola, is attached to the sacredness of the drum when its life span terminates (retired) with the demise of an Oṣoni. A new Òsírìgì drum must be made for new successor and this must be done before the enthronement of a new one. The set used during the reign of the deceased Oṣoni is permanently hung at the palace never to be played again. The symbolic explanation for this is that the drum accompanies a deceased Oṣoni to the great beyond. This is an important aspect in the rite of passage that explains how the drum re-aggregates the king with his ancestors. It also establishes the concept of life after death. The hanging of the drum also expresses the concept of continuity in the rulership of the Oṣoni. This symbol identifies the continued support of the deceased king to the present Oṣoni and the fact that death could not in any way separate the dead from the living.

De Silva in his review of Pemberton gives a reason for ritual symbolism in Ògún festival. He showed the purpose of symbolizing Ògún as a feature of his:

Reality and ambiguity of violence in human experience, a violence that is created through act of destruction, but which can also destroy what it has created". The rites... require that Yoruba recognize the irony of cultural existence as death is essential to life" (De Silva,2006:54).

This acknowledgment in his view shows the understanding that to achieve social peace and maintain political harmony, Ògún must be appeased. This is done by surrendering to this higher cultural power. In the light of this, the involvement of ritual

drums like *òsìrìgì* and *àgèrè* in *Ọlójó* allows the fulfilment of this purpose in the festival. In this case, the king and the people have a special role in the sacrifice needed for the drum to make it sacred for spiritual undertaking among the people. This allows the leadership control of the king over his subjects to be more formidable. Apart from the two drums, specified drums like *dùndún* ensemble, and *bẹ̀m̀bẹ̀*, a form of indigenous drum recognized for *Òrìṣà* also contributed to this fulfilment. The beating and their sound are related and directed to a particular song which seeks for clemency of *Ògún*. The song is as follows:

*Ògún o ọwọ ẹrò*

*Ògún please do it gently*

*Ògún o ọwọ ẹrò*(Olojo festival, 2012) *Ògún please do it gently*

One important thing noted in two year episodes of *Ọlójó* festival witnessed so far is the absence of physical beating of hunter version of *àgèrè*, *afẹrẹ* and *apinti* which are the ritual drums for *Ògún* as well. These drums according to Akinyemi are the ensemble mandated by *Ògún* himself for the cult and his generation(Akinyemi,2013). The drums must be beaten by mature and aged hunters. Recently, due to external pressures that have led to the erosion of such traditions, the participation of the old hunters has reduced. This reduction adversely affects the transmittal of expertise from those who possess deep knowledge of the culture of the drum in the festival. The young people who are left sometimes lack the patience to continue the line of the traditions left by their forefathers.

The *àgèrè* drum apart from its use during *Ọlójó*, must also be used during burial rites of the deceased hunters. It is specialized only for dirge song of the hunters during burial transition ritual rites. The beating of the drum must be repeated with a lamentation song which is sung fifteen times. My informant declined to sing any of the songs because he was not ready to die (Akinyemi,2013).

This remark identifies the ritual uses of the drum for the hunters. It is meant only for remembrance of *Ògún* and his generation every year. In *Ọlójó*, it is used to commemorate the covenant between *Ọ̀nì*, the *Ọlọ́fin*, and *Ògún* who was a warrior and hunter during the early stages of Earth's formation. This covenant revalidates the leadership authority of the Ooni (the king of Ile-Ife) every year and it also establishes his throne.

## Conclusion

The indigenous drums described and analysed here serve as critical media of socialization that influence values and affirm cultural unity of the Yoruba of Ile-Ife. This unified cultural ethos is what the king relies upon for the actualisation and manifestation of his political leadership over his subjects and the entire community. The use of drum languages presents innovative words for petition, supplication and acceptance in

religiously mediated ways. Their use helps the minds of the participants to interpret and decode these political and religious messages in dramatic ways. Overall, indigenous drums facilitate the acts of spiritual expression in ritual passages. It awakens and invokes the spirits of deities in festivals and thus motivates connection between them and the participants. This shows the drum's ritual salience. An indigenous drum personifies the interest of the worshippers as it influences the acts of the gods. These influences allow the goodwill of the gods to be extended to the people by authenticating their prayer requests in various ways. It also shows that the king of Ile-Ife could only assume his office as a vicegerent of the deities consequence of receiving the indigenous "osirigi" drum as a sceptre recognised for the throne which he assumed. This establishes the fact that African traditions embellish their royal spiritual constitution through symbols for their political outfit and practices.

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**Strangers in the city.**  
**Some psycho-social and ontological aspects of representing the otherness in**  
**literature**

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In different cultures, traditional representations of the *stranger* (who could particularly be an "alien", "outsider", "outlander" or "new comer") often highlight the difference, if not threat, and could induce a cautious reserve, even enmity among the people who are in such a situation. This is revealed by the vocabulary of certain Indo-European languages – with their specific expressions of negative alterity<sup>1</sup> – and also, by a rich enough literature focusing on the various aspects of the otherness. In a way, a very ancient predisposition to xenophobic symptoms – which are etiologically based upon primary perceptions and tendencies, such as territorial instincts and those of preserving access to different kind of resources – advances the respective modern *isms*, ideologically codified. Perhaps as ancient as this basic xenophobia, some hospitality practices, spread all over the world, have their origins in some symbolical strategies meant to diminish the potentially dangerous effect of the presence of the Other, and thus, to a better health of the intercultural relationship. Inviting someone – the Other – to his/ her own dinner is a very important and universal act of ancient hospitality, which is based on an identity principle: "we are what we eat", and eating together the same food we'll necessarily become similar; thus, finally we'll be good friends, not enemies (Mesnil 1997: 203-204). This is why, in Eastern Europe, particularly in Romania, the strangers are traditionally welcomed giving them bread and salt. As a proof, the Russian verb *hlebosolit* – composed from *hleb*, "bread", and *sol*, "salt" – is a reminiscence of this East-European greeting ceremony of "bread and salt" (Mesnil 1997: 204). Similarly, the Latin *companio* refers to the sharing of the same bread (Latin *panis*), which is the purest form of companionship (Mesnil 1997: 204), and from this Latin etymology, derived some lexical families in Romance languages.

However, in the collective imaginary, the *stranger* is more than an accumulation of ethnic characteristics. This is what also concerns us further, as well as the recurrence – not without explanation – of a gnostic scenario in some modern representations of history and of individual or collective exile experience. The corpus we chose<sup>2</sup> is not exhaustive, but only (and possibly) illustrative, so that it may seize, from different angles, the figure of the Other: Euripides's *Medea* and *The Bacchae*, *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, *The Knight*

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<sup>1</sup> Lat. *hostis*, *-is*, "enemy, foe", but also "stranger"; Fr. *étrange*, "strange, odd", Fr. *étranger*, "stranger"; Engl. *strange* and *stranger*, Engl. *alien*, "stranger", "different from", "hostile". The examples could continue.

<sup>2</sup> The works respond to each other intertextually – in a wide sense, à la Riffaterre, or even in the more rigorous acceptance of Genette. Their approach is located at the interference of literary comparativism and mythology, the anthropology of the imaginary and the history of ideas.

of *Resignation* by Vintilă Horia, Mircea Eliade's "fantastic" prose, Emil Cioran's *The Evil Demiurge*.

### **The evil stranger in the city. From Medea to Laura Brown**

In Euripides's play, Medea is a barbarian witch, the evil stranger from Colchis. With her elemental intensity, she baffles the city's ambition of orderliness. Her image is shaped by negative attributes: she defies the traditions of the polis and, through the art of magic, she evades the justice of the place. The "stranger" is no less dangerous at her native place, in Colchis. There as well, she has a terrifying appetite for the memorable and crude act that anticipates a looming Lady Macbeth, however without the latter's conscience crisis. Medea's conflict with her foster cities is that from Euripides's *The Bacchae*: the "foreign god", Dionysus, the lord of enthusiasm and madness, clashes with the king of Thebes, Pentheus, thoughtlessly confident in the power of reason. It is a recurrent conflict at the ancient Greeks. And the symptom of a culture of balance, that feels, nevertheless, that its foundation of rationality is threatened by the abysmal smouldering of the psychic. Dionysus refutes the rationalist vanity that demands order and structure, of everlasting humanism.

In *The Hours*<sup>3</sup> by Michael Cunningham – a novel made of the stories of three women, among whom Virginia Woolf –, Laura Brown has something of a (post)modern Medea. The alterity – a penalized *difference* – is marked through physiognomy, behaviour (phobic reactions, the "strange" passion of reading that enables her to evade daily anxiety and chores, even her name (Zielski)). A "foreign" figure, a queer nature, she does not kill her children (although she is tempted to commit suicide during pregnancy), but abandons them. Richard, who has inherited her talent, literary passion and morbid sensitivity will bear this trauma throughout all his life. The proof, the monstrous image of the mother in his novels. Richard's suicide, sick with AIDS, on the very day that he would have been awarded a notable literary prize, is somehow Laura's murder. She saves herself; she resists neurosis, depression, schizoid impulses. However, the due date comes with the gradual disappearance of the family, which she has left for a librarian's life without obligations, in Canada. The runaway "stranger" is found again at the end of the novel: old and lonely, guilty and yet innocent. Lost in Manhattan, a victim – like of a destiny – of her fragility and selfishness, at the same time. The immanent fatality from the modern tragedy (that of O'Neill, for example) manifests here without great gestures or tirades. The anger of Clarissa (alias "Mrs Dalloway") when faced with the irreparable, under the preventing mask of a woman of the world, becomes an empathetic acceptance of the "stranger". The octogenarian – blasphemed and adored – eventually brings the spectre of a life led with effort and regret, as if long time ago and to her disadvantage, she had made a deal with death:

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<sup>3</sup> The title coincides with the initial title of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*.



“(…) herself, Laura Brown, is the ghost and goddess in a small body of private myths made public (…). She knows she has been worshipped and despised; she knows she has obsessed a man who might, conceivably, prove to be a significant artist. (…) She says calmly, of her son, that he was a wonderful writer”<sup>4</sup>.

“Laura Brown, the lost mother, the martyr and fiend. (…) Here she is then; the woman of wrath and sorrow, of pathos, of dazzling charm; the woman in love with death; the victim and torturer who haunted Richard’s work. Here is an old woman, a retired librarian from Toronto, wearing old woman’s shoes”<sup>5</sup>.

### Camus’s “stranger”, the Gnostics and the Kierkegaard's “knight of resignation”

Saint Augustin and the apologist of the *Stranger* meet – despite the fifteen centuries between them – under the sky of Algeria. The former, a bishop in Hippo Numidia, tempted in his youth by the Gnostic heresy of the Manichees. The latter, an apostate existentialist, for whom living and philosophising makes sense only by assuming (not necessarily “understanding” by logical mellowing or sublimation in theosophy) death and the absurd. There are, in Albert Camus’s work, several “Gnostic”, iconic images. It is nevertheless inevitable the question of whether they carry the meaning circulated by the Gnostics, over several centuries. They made use of several elements taken, to a good measure, from an older tradition: religious, literary, philosophical. (The Gnostic motif of the celestial repatriation of the soul is anticipated – as of the ancient Egypt, the era of the slough that led to the *Debate between a Man and his Soul* – by the motif of returning home; a return made possible by death, after slavery on earth<sup>6</sup>.)

What connection could there be between two systems of thought – Gnosticism and Existentialism – occurring nearly two millennia apart? Moreover, the former is an exaltation of transcendence, whereas the other is – as Sartre says – a “humanism”, (only) to the extent in which it denies the existence of divinity<sup>7</sup>. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hans Jonas has brought the two doctrines together. He noted the fact that they resemble in how they render the human condition – the condition of man fatally “cast into the world”: “abandonment, forgetfulness, inauthenticity” (Culianu 2000: 327). Hence, the image of the *stranger*, symptomatic for the Gnostic (self)representation. What creates the “positive force of anguish and the energy” required by *salvation*. (A possible answer to the human precariousness, the gnosis<sup>8</sup> is like knowledge that saves). For the

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<sup>4</sup> Cunningham 1998: 221.

<sup>5</sup> Cunningham 1998: 225-226.

<sup>6</sup> See *Debate between a Man and his Soul (Dialogul unui deznădăjduit cu sufletul său)*, apud (Davy 1999: 41- 42).

<sup>7</sup> In other words, existentialism is one of the “most typical forms of modern nihilism”, whereas Gnosticism remains the “champion of transcendence” in the Western history of ideas (Culianu 2000: 327). Hans Jonas focuses on the similarities between the two trends; Ioan Petru Culianu, on the gap between them: one is – as Culianu argues – the “reverse” of the other.

<sup>8</sup> “Absolute knowledge, perfect, plenary, supreme science, able to redeem through itself the one who acquires and owns it” (Puech 2007: 7). What the old Christian heresiologists called *alleged gnosis* or *gnosis with a fake name*, and for modern commentators, Gnosticism represents an intellectual, religious, existential phenomenon, articulated into some thought systems that grew in parallel or in symbiosis with Christianity, in the 1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the West, the Near and Middle

existentialist, the condition of alienation intermingles with “mundanity” and “obscures the meaning of the being as a *being-for-death*” (Culianu 2000: 327).

Hans Jonas, Henri-Charles Puech, Ioan Petru Culianu are only some of the authors asserting the relative unity and continuity of the gnosis as an intellectual and existential paradigm, although the forms it has taken, from Antiquity to (post) modernity are diverse. Culianu (2006: 157–159) finds Gnostic influences at Goethe, Byron, Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Leopardi, Bulgakov etc. The exegesis has affiliated to Gnosticism authors with whom it shares only an inventory of motifs/ images, some of these desemantized in relation to an authentic gnostic context. It is the case of Albert Camus, who recovers old gnostic symbols, modifying their meaning through recontextualization. His intellectual biography confirms these preoccupations; he obtains his Diploma of Higher Studies (1936) with a work on the *Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme* (2006: 157–159). Camus manages a paradoxical synthesis between the gnostic “language” and the “nihilistic” message of (post)modernity. In fact, Ioan Petru Culianu would rather speak of Camus’s gnostic *imaginary* than of his gnostic *view* (Culianu 2000: 327-328); just like for Harold Bloom, Borges is, “from an imaginative perspective, a gnostic, although a sceptic humanist intellectually and morally speaking” (Bloom 2007: 466). But is Camus really a “nihilist”? “Freedom to nothingness” (Landgrebe 1974), nihilism places itself in the empty space left by the “death” of God and subsequently by the loss of the belief in reason, as a sufficient guarantee for truth. The belief in reason is

“(…) but a *substitute (Ersatz)* of the lost religion (…). The moment this shadow of an original belief disappears, there is nothing in the world that may replace it. (...) man is actually faced with nothingness” (Landgrebe 1974).

Or, Camus’s “philosophy” of the absurd is (only) an attempt to “define a behaviour”: that – as Camus argues – of the “man who believes *neither in God, nor in reason*”. Hence, the absurd and exultancy, the vital paroxysm as a reaction to nothingness. From “continuity into despair, there may occur joy” (Camus 2006: 1000). “The Shadow of Dionysus” – as Michel Maffesoli argues (2003) – comprises the megalopolis: the taste of celebration, *fiesta*, exaltation, hedonism. For the “stranger” Meursault and his mother, the approaching death sparks vitalist effusion: her late engagement and the crowd electrified by hatred, which he, as a gladiator facing his final fight, wants to have as a witness to his execution. An elemental energy, the pathos – love and hatred – occur, here, as the only certainty. God and the “other” life are related to the unverifiable nature of belief. Camus’s titles evoke the favourite themes of Gnostics: *The Stranger, The Fall, Exile and the Kingdom, Nuptials*. In the Gnostic condition, Hans Jonas sees a “*double alienation*”: from the world and from transcendence; for both of these, man is a *stranger*. Hence, the feeling

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East, as well as in Egypt (Puech 2007: 8).

of *exile*, that finds its end only by redeeming the *kingdom* – an ideal country, lost at one moment after the *fall*. One fragment from *The Myth of Sisyphus* is an agglomeration of recontextualized Gnostic images and symbols:

“A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a *stranger*. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a *lost home* or the hope of a *promised land*. This *divorce* between man and this life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of *absurdity*” (Camus 1955: 6)<sup>9</sup>.

The compass of Gnostics always indicates an *acosmic* homeland. The world is “evil”, imperfect, because its Demiurge is “evil”. Kafka’s *The Castle* or the instance that leads the trial of Joseph K. illustrates quite well – although transposed in another context – its signification. For Camus, Kafka’s melancholy is the same as that of Proust or Plotin; it is the “nostalgia of lost paradises” (Camus 2006: 224). Meursault accompanies the Gnostics only for part of the journey. However, like them and the Existentialists, he remains the “stranger” until the end (*l'étranger*). He is “divorcing” the world and unforgivingly strange (*étrange*); he ignores usages and conventions. Accused by his own lawyer, he is sentenced to death. His elimination is almost an atavistic reflex: “stranger”, therefore dangerous. With his disillusioned naturalness, verging on cynicism, he is an exception. And therefore undesirable. He is – as Llosa observes – the “one who must die” (Llosa 2005). Nothing connects him to the absurdity of the world, its sophisticated and opaque system, like that in Kafka’s *The Process* or *The Castle*<sup>10</sup>. The night before the execution – “fraught with *stars* and *signs*” – brings solitary salvation to the “stranger”. Entered into another dimension, he awakens “with the stars on his face”. Cross with the lower practices, Meursault becomes the citizen of a utopic homeland. The message of *light* has reached him. Camus is not a mystic, but borrows some images from such a symbolism. He is somehow, like Cioran, a religious being, but “without God”, a “denied mystic”. Just like Kafka “repudiates every idea of God, no matter how far and hidden in the primordial abyss. What Kafka asserts is a human, primary, divine but lay attribute, knowledge where indestructibility is known”; it is gnosis, without being Gnosticism (Bloom 2007: 460). “Man cannot live without the permanent belief in something indestructible existing in itself, although both this belief, as well as the indestructible element may remain constantly hidden from him” (Kafka, *apud* Bloom 2007: 455). The idea of the *indestructible* corresponds to – is the symptom of – a need for “spiritual authority” that Kafka experiences, a man for whom “theophany does not exist” and who pretends to belong to a “spirituality independent

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<sup>9</sup> This “*divorce*” between the self and the world – between the I and the Self – between the need of man to understand the world’s refusal to be understood – is opposed, in metaphorical language, by the *wedding*: a “mystical marriage”, the “meeting of the Spiritual and its double”, of the soul (a degraded, embodied form of the pure Spirit) and its *alter ego* from the “native”, astral realm (Puech 2007: 25.).

<sup>10</sup> Together with Dostoievski, Kafka is one of Camus’s benchmarks; hence, the essays that Camus dedicated to the two precursors.

from any belief or ideology” (Bloom 2007: 459 - 460). “If neither immortality nor blessing participate to that something that is indestructible then, for all that, what does participate to it? (...) the indestructible lies within us as a hope or a quest, but Kafka’s most sombre paradox is that the manifestations of these quests are destructive and, particularly, self-destructive” (Bloom 2007: 460 – 462).

Like Sisyphus – as seen by Camus – Meursault discovers, before his end, that he is happy: death may untie the Gordian knot of the absurd. There is nothing “beyond” – Camus assures us; this life is “the only one that was given to us”. (For Gnostics, death is a “return” to the state before the “casting” into existence. For “nihilists” and the “revolted” Camus, it is “a liberation into nothing”<sup>11</sup>.) But Meursault makes a late discovery, that strips death of its sombre aura; it is not death that is tenebrous, but – hence the absurd – the meaningless world: “without a master”, as Camus writes in one of his essays. Like for the Gnostics, God is a complete “stranger” to the world whom – a regrettable accident produced in the Eon’s perfect laboratory – he ignores. Their God – the “Good” one, who is not the one in the *Old Testament* – is forever the *Stranger*, irreducible to the aporias of intelligence. The Gnostic man is himself a “stranger”, expiating meaninglessly the fault of Genesis. Which evokes a cosmological equation that the Gnostics inherit from Orphism, *cosmos-skotos*<sup>12</sup>. The responsibility for evil does not belong to the strange Father (acosmic and so “good”), but to the Creator: “Second Demiurge” – “blind”, cruel, “jealous”, angry, ignorant, weak<sup>13</sup>. For the Gnostics, life *here* is but “captivity, burial or *blindness*” (Puech 2007:17). All in all, an error. It is an absurd “blindness” (the darkening of both sight and mind) that Meursault blames for his crime. In the language of Gnostic metaphors, *this* world is sleep, lethargy, drunkenness, unconsciousness, forgetfulness (Puech 2007:17). Until the accident, Meursault lives vegetatively, somnolently, at the pace of biological or social routine. The accident is a moment of inner rupture; it is similar to what the revelation of the *gnosis* (of the saving knowledge on the origin of evil) causes to a gnostic: through “initiation”, he “awakens” to himself<sup>14</sup>. On different paths, the paradigmatic gnostic and the (quasi)existentialist Meursault reveals his fundamental “estrangement”: one, through revelation; the other one, through unmediated experience.

If the novel is read from the gnostic perspective – which is possible, but not compulsory –, there is performed, in front of the crowd, more than the mere drama of an individual: it is a parable of the *Being*<sup>15</sup>. Its meaning may be obscure, dissimulated on

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<sup>11</sup> See *supra*.

<sup>12</sup> Cosmos-shadows.

<sup>13</sup> (Puech 2007: 23). Above the ignorant – “evil” – Demiurge, there is the “unknown God”, the “Father”: “absolutely transcendental”, with no connections to the world or time, inaccessible to ordinary knowledge and manifesting only through “inner revelation”. He is absolute Good; his function is neither to create nor to judge, but to *redeem* the creature from its filthy condition. In this “unknown God” of light, the gnostic finds the guarantee of a redemption which he seeks outside the world” (*Ibid.*).

<sup>14</sup> He passes from “death” to another type of life (*anastasis*, “resurrection”, *ananeosis*, “renewal”) (Puech 2007:17) .

<sup>15</sup> The novel may also be interpreted from a perspective convergent to the gnostic one: Heidegger’s view upon the Being. Mircea Arman provides us with an argument: “what we should understand by death is not equivalent to the finiteness of the biologic, to the state of suppression but, like at Heidegger or Blaga, to the state of inertness, the perfect state given by the rounding up of the cycle of Life and the Being’s entry into the perspective of the eternal (s.n.)”. Anyway, the «case» Camus is neither singular nor random. We may speak of reverberations from Heidegger’s views at René Char, B. Fondane, J. Derrida, G. Braque and others. The hermeneutics of the «Being» has grown into an era in the European culture” (Mircea Arman,

purpose. Just like in Mircea Eliade's prose, epiphanic signs are revealed only to the mystagogue, the one who already "knows". At the end of Meursault's story, the stars take the world/ the man/ the *stranger* to their own trust. At Eliade, in *Incognito at Buchenwald*, "the same light" envelops all things, "no matter how ugly these may be". A light – of "stars and signs" – which Meursault discovers by himself, without the possibility of somebody else revealing it to him; in any case, not the priest called to hear his last confession. Meursault is named – a reminiscence from Nietzsche – the "Antichrist": he brings a shocking change in how things are viewed; he places himself outside the *Establishment*.

Camus approaches a thinker that the existentialists regarded as a precursor, the Danish Søren Kierkegaard. Camus's "happy Sisyphus" and Meursault at peace with himself before the execution are of Kierkegaard's stock of "the knight of resignation". The latter, an "*estranged* individual, the *stranger* by excellence"; "happy in the virtue of the absurd" and beyond all faith: "(...) not to find peace in the suffering of resignation, but the *joy in the virtue of the absurd* – is a real miracle. The one who does this is great, the only great one" (Kierkegaard 2005: 104-105) 16. This is how Meursault finally reveals himself. He finds his fundamental *estrangement* from the world and from transcendence. (His experience reminds somehow of the uncertain, ambiguous atheism of Ivan Karamazov; Ivan admits the idea of God as a spiritual principle, a God of meaning, whatever we may call him – "if it didn't exist, we would have to invent him" –, but he can accept neither the world He created nor the Christian mystification meant to justify it. In the mind of the most revolted of the Karamazovs, there cannot fit, at the same time, the crookedness of the world – the absurd suffering of children, which no need for redemption can justify – and the existence of God. However, there fits something that reminds of the Kafkian *indestructible*. Meursault leaves the world with the exaltation of a winner who has extorted a secret from life. It is – despite Camus's departure from Existentialism – "the great secret of gods", called out by Sartre's Orestes: "men are free", although they "don't know it". Free and delivered to the existentialist "nothingness" – to the world without any God, like Sartre's hero. Or free and delivered to an irreducible mystery of "stars and signs", like Camus's *stranger*<sup>17</sup>. Both Meursault and Camus's Sisyphus may be identified in one of the lines from Sartre: *Mon acte, c'est ma liberté*; no less, the act to assume the absurd. (And also/ or the Kafkian indestructible?)

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"Prolegomenă", in Martin Heidegger, *Ființă și timp*, translated from German (Eng. *Being and Time*) by Dorin Tiliuca, Notes by Dorin Tiliuca and Mircea Arman, Scientific reviewer: Mircea Arman, Foreword by Octavian Vuia, Editura "Jurnalul literar", 1994, p. 13)

<sup>16</sup> An image – also Kierkegaardian – of the "knight of resignation" is the "knight of belief". He is happy: "the only happy individual", rewarded with the delights and "inheritance" of the finite. But, "in the infinite resignation, there is only "peace and quiet"; nothing else, nor now nor never. Nothing else, expect a consoling promise: *anyone* "can discipline himself in performing this movement that, through suffering, reconciles him with existence" (Kierkegaard 2005: 99).

<sup>17</sup> The evolution of Camus's thinking, as revealed in his prose and essays, confirms a statement of Mircea Arman: "(...) a writer like Camus should not be inscribed in the so-called circle of *existentialism*, whose relevance does not go beyond the quotidian (...), but rather among those who, following the path of the Being, have struggled to essentially utter the truth and its foundation" (Mircea Arman, *op. cit.*, p. 13). Camus is closer to Heidegger – whose approach "starts from the Being to man and back to Being" – than to Sartre's existentialism, "from Man to Being and back to man (Noica), an approach related more to the «human social» and its external implications (maladjustment, hostility, anxiety in front of nothingness) than to the meeting between the human and what is essentially essential to it: Being (Heidegger)" (*Ibidem*).

## The “strange” god in Venice: Pentheus the Theban and Thomas Mann’s Aschenbach

In *Death in Venice*, the meaning of the “stranger” is contaminated by that of Dionysus, a “foreign god” and yet so familiar to Greeks, before Christianity. Aschenbach, the hero of the short story, relates to certain (mythological and psychoanalytical) archetypes<sup>18</sup>. Apparently, the multiple identity of Aschenbach – in the short story, explicitly or only allusively akin to Socrates, Appolo, Dionysus, Jesus – shatters his coherence. In fact, these associations are already established by the exegesis. Schelling, for example, compares Socrates to Dionysus, “the young god thanks to whom Uranus’s desolate sky will be filled with songs and frenzy” (Jankélévitch 1994: 10)<sup>19</sup>. The polyphonic inferiority of Aschenbach, where Socrates and Dionysus meet, reflects the portrait that Nietzsche (a declared model of Thomas Mann) outlines for Socrates. Nietzsche sees in the Socratic attitude an exemplary synthesis of a way of thinking – sabotaging, with lucidity and irony, the traditional rigours of the polis – and a jocular-Dionysian way of being<sup>20</sup>. Two effects of Socratic irony – remarked by Vladimir Jankélévitch – enable a rapprochement between Dionysus *lysios* (the “Liberator”) and the master of maieutics: “Socrates represents the conscience of Athenians, the good as well as the evil one”. He “liberates” his fellow countrymen from convictions that had turned into automatisms. At the same time, he stirs them: he takes away the comfort of their old beliefs (Jankélévitch 1994: 10). Socrates and the “stranger” Dionysus – an imported god, a “late comer” from the East – “threatens an entire life style and a whole universe of values” (Eliade 2000: 227) on which the old city was built. Aschenbach remains, for a long time, the prisoner of his own work, his social image and all sorts of stereotypes. He is “freed”, upon approaching end, by the Dionysian revelation of Life – intense, voracious, in fatal sisterhood with Death.

Thomas Mann projects, in Aschenbach, the duality of the German spirit and of himself. The short story – published in 1912 – was interpreted as a parable of the crisis experienced, at that time, by the German society and culture: divided between Goethe and Nietzsche, between the (neo)classical esteem for reason and the apology of irrationalism

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<sup>18</sup> This interpretation relies on Thomas Mann’s vigorous advocacy – as shown by his correspondence – of the marriage between mythology and psychology, an alliance that displays not just a possibility, but an imperative of the epoch. Here is how the novel writer salutes, in a letter to the scholar Károly Kerényi, born in Timișoara, the occurrence of one of his works, *The Divine Child*: “The fact that you have united your forces – on the scientific realm – with Jung, mythology and psychology therefore, represents a very strange event, gratifying and very characteristic of today’s spiritual moment. The book *The Divine Child* has reached me in time. It is an extremely interesting book. (...) I have long been a follower of this combination: mythology and psychology. Bringing these two together seems to represent the world of the future, a type of humanity, blessed by the spirit and the lower depth. Sincerely yours, Thomas Mann” (Letter dated February 18<sup>th</sup> 1941, addressed to Károly Kerényi).

<sup>19</sup> If Parmenides is, “in his turn, a Cronos of philosophy, who devours, as of their very occurrence, the concrete particularities, plurality, mobility and transformation, Socrates, a “Dionysian nature, mocks this greedy unity, this Chronian principle, where the diversity and variety of things suffocates” (Jankélévitch 1994: 10 -11).

<sup>20</sup> “(...) there will come a time when, in order to progress along the path of moral and reason, we would consult, instead of the *Bible*, the ‘Memorable words of Socrates’, and Montaigne and Horace would be regarded as initiators and guides in the intelligence of this mediator wise man, the simplest and most alive of us all, Socrates. He gathers the paths of the different philosophical rules that are, in fact, rules for different personalities (...) fixed by reason and habit, all culminating in the joy of living and the joy felt in front of one’s self; (...) Socrates is superior to the founder of Christianity through his joyful seriousness and that *cheerful wisdom* (s. a.) that is the most beautiful state of the human soul. Moreover, his thinking was also superior” (Nietzsche 1996: 59).

and anarchic vitalism. (This is related to a certain *Zeitgeist*, whose apologist in our country was Nae Ionescu.) Dionysus's victory meant, however, the surrender of Germany. With a feeling of guilt, Thomas Mann sees its cause. And when history repeats itself, in the fifth decade, he opposes – which brings about his exile – the *Führer* and the hysteria that drags Germany into its defeat. *Doctor Faustus* (1943-1947) is an answer to *Death in Venice*. The end of Leverkühn – an excruciating agony, without the beatific aura of the mystic death of Aschenbach – allegorically transposes the trauma of collective history into an individual destiny. *Doctor Faustus* is – as the author said about his famous conference *Germany and the Germans* (1945) – “a German self-critique”. And a long-term warning for fellow countrymen: Dionysus will either lose or lose them.

*Death in Venice* remains yet an encomium of the unconscious that defeats, in a sort of “Twilight of the gods”, the dialectic spirit and Socratic wisdom. (The short story could have a motto from Schönberg: “art belongs to the unconscious”.) The real appears to Aschenbach in a transfigured manner. A mythical geography replaces the real one: the Ancient Greece of the Bacchae, Orpheus and Dionysus overlaps, in imagination, the Venice of the *belle époque*. Remembering and assuming prestigious cultural masks (Aschenbach as Socrates, Tadzio as Phaedrus or epiphany of Hermes and Dionysus) lead to the character's split image. His confused intimacy is the stage of a psychodrama with mythical actors. The action moves from the exterior (München, the Adriatic coast, Venice) to the hero's intimacy – desiring “something completely *foreign*, something without any connection to his ordinary life”, the “incomparable, the extraordinary from stories” (Mann 1991: 21-22). The southern holiday becomes an escape into interiority, the (re)cognition of the “*stranger*”, of the “*enemy*” that is implacable on the inside. Defeated by the “flattering and ambiguous” Venice, Aschenbach discovers, with fear and voluptuousness, a completely new face. In a foreign place, surrounded by the city's sick beauty, Aschenbach abandons himself, like Euripide's Pentheus, to the “*stranger*” within. Mythical symbols translate the metamorphosis<sup>21</sup>, the anarchic defy of the reasonable.

In Euripide's *The Bacchae*, Dionysus is a “foreign”, “new” god, who takes revenge on those who ignore him. From the very beginning, his power is acknowledged by the old wise men of Thebes – Cadmus and Tiresias –, but contested by the young king Pentheus, too confident in the power of reason. Disguised as Dionysus, Pentheus gradually identifies with the “foreign” god that he had once blasphemed. The humility is not enough; Pentheus<sup>22</sup> falls killed by his own mother, the Bacchant Agave. The portrait of the Polish teenager from *Death in Venice* reminds of classical representations of Dionysus: blond, effeminate, smooth-faced<sup>23</sup>. Tadzio, as Aschenbach remarks, is the “tool of a mocking god”: eventually, Dionysus punishes the vanity of Pentheus, or Eros, or Hermes,

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<sup>21</sup> Dionysus was not just a divinity of wine and vegetation – with cyclic succession of deaths and rebirths – but, on the contrary, the god of metamorphoses and theatrical illusion. Aschenbach's transformation – external (cosmetic) and internal – has something excessive, like of the baroque drama (where the obsession with fragility, the inconsistency of life is compensated by the spectacular agglomeration of stage effects) or rather, of psycho-drama.

<sup>22</sup> Like the ritual victim, who, in the Dionysian cult, is an epiphany of the god.

<sup>23</sup> See. Mann 1993: 36. In archaic iconography, Dionysus is full-bodied, dark-haired and bearded. In the classical period, his features soften.

psychopomp and protector of travellers. In Venice, Aschenbach dedicates himself to a sort of cult of the “divine child”<sup>24</sup>; like Pentheus, he pays for this experience of (self)knowledge. An epiphanic presence, Tadgio is an ambiguous messenger of the ideal and death. The last “work” of Aschenbach is a mystic(mythic)-aesthetic projection of his own death; like at Mallarmé, Nothingness intermingles with the Absolute.

By means of a dream of Aschenbach, Thomas Mann evokes the celebration rites of Dionysus: *oribasia and pannihia, (dia)sparagmos, ômophagya, enthousiasmos, mania*<sup>25</sup>. With what consequences at the level of the narrative’s meanings? “Vital paroxysm” leads, thanks to the alchemy of the rite, to the “supernatural and incorruptible” (Vertemont 2000: 119)<sup>26</sup>. It is Aschenbach’s journey marked – in an attempt of objectification through mythical projection – by the initiation imaginary: the experience of the self as alterity, (re)cognition of the “stranger inside”. The reversal of the polarity Apollonian/Dionysian has the Nietzschean meaning of “plenitude”: “a Yes without hesitation, said to suffering itself, to guilt itself, said to everything that is doubtful and *foreign* in the very existence”, “a last (...) overwhelmingly enthusiastic Yes said to life” (Nietzsche 1994a: 64). The Olympian Aschenbach achieves the stigmata of humanity: humility and suffering. Nietzsche speaks of a “psychology of tragedy. Aschenbach’s metamorphosis illustrates it: “(...) to be myself, beyond fear and pity, the eternal joy of becoming – that joy that also encloses the voluptuousness of destruction...” (Nietzsche 1994b: 65).

Venice is for Nietzsche, too, a favourite place, in the immediate and symbolic geography. Although the figure of the *stranger* – frequent in Thomas Mann’s prose – is familiar to Nietzsche, the modern Thomas Mann accuses symptoms of postmodernism: “everything has been said”, there cannot be writing but rewriting; (almost) everything is “intertext” and “palimpsest” à la Genette.

## **A Wallachian “knight of resignation” in Venice. Søren Kierkegaard and Vintilă Horia**

In Kierkegaard’s terms, with some gnostic allusions, *The Knight of Resignation* – Vintilă Horia’s novel – reveals a Romanian feeling of history. Venice – mixed in the most troubled diplomatic ballet of the Gate with the West – is the host of a wanderer without illusions: a “foreigner” in the vernacular sense, a “stranger” in a gnostic way and “resigned” in Kierkegaard’s manner. (Dante, lining up with such heresy as can be found in *Fedeli d’Amore* and René Guénon are, together with Giovanni Papini, fundamental readings for Vintilă Horia.) The Romanian history – measured with the metronome of invasions and withdrawals “into the woods”, from the great migrations to the post-war resistance in the

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<sup>24</sup> Among the “divine children” of Greek mythology – the persecuted who turn the odds in their favour – there are Zeus and his son, Dionysus.

<sup>25</sup> We find, in the dream sequence, the moments of those mysteries that consist of the participation of the Bacchae to the “total epiphany” (Eliade 2000: 230) of Dionysus.

<sup>26</sup> “(...) similar frenzies reveal a communion with the vital and cosmic forces and they could be interpreted only as divine possession.” (Eliade 2000: 231).



mountains – is reduced to its essence. Radu-Negru is an archetypal character. Just like Ahasverus is the effigy of another collective destiny. Radu-Negru's "resignation" is primarily a denial of heroic illusion; it is an abnegation of exemplary history, "where great wars have forged great hearts". His nation "boycotts" history but cannot decide its path<sup>27</sup>. ("Why were we born? Why were we born *here*?" –Maria-Doamna bursts.) The "major" civilization of the West ignores this lost – "resigned" – people on the edge of the empire; one that systematically practices "withdrawal into history". Radu-Negru, the Danubian messenger, seeks in vain, in the chancelleries of the West, loyal support for the Eastern Danube bastion. Like at Kierkegaard, his "resignation" is sceptical distancing from God; like the allies, Heaven has forgotten about him and his people. The Wallachian "knight" is burdened with a curse that – hardened by God's dumbness – his Old Man casts upon Heaven, before death. Like Meursault, the Old Man closes his eyes cross with history and an "evil" God, who makes it incomprehensible. The wrath of the Old Man echoes in Cioran's diatribes. Those from *The Evil Demiurge* or *Mon pays*:

"(My country – n.n.) I wanted it strong, without measure, crazy, like an evil force, a fatality that would have made the world tremble, but it was small, modest, lacking the attributes of a destiny. When I would lean over its past, I would discover only servitude, *resignation* and humility, and upon returning to the present, I would be welcomed by the same flaws" (Cioran 1996).

Radu-Negru believes that the world is "badly constructed (...). Heaven and hell were but original symbols, with no possible solution, as long as men would be men" (Horia 1991: 157). This "mistake" is rather a gnostic "antecedent negligence" – a divine error – than the guilt of Adam from the *Scriptures*<sup>28</sup>. Also of gnostic or orphic inspiration are certain allusions to the *cosmos-skotos* (world-shadows) and a certain way of "liberation" connected to the "unknown God" of light – who, for the Gnostics, is that of the soul and Pleroma:

"To put yourself to the trouble of such a life, to what good? To grope, like horses, at every step you take, surrounded by shadows that never end" (Horia 1991: 66).

"Something at the bottom of the soul or somebody, perhaps that image of God that we carry inside us without being aware of it, signalled my approaching release..." (Horia 1991: 63)

The same starry sky<sup>29</sup> overarches the Venetian exile of Radu-Negru and Meursault's

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<sup>27</sup> "Maybe there's Vienna burning, (...), and we are rotting in this valley, stalking a thousand poor Turks, whom we shall crush under the rocks"; "in this small valley, (...) the gestures of people, even in victory, became useless"; bravery "without any pride and consequences" (Horia 1991: 155- 168).

<sup>28</sup> The idea that Emil Cioran also resumes in *The Evil Demiurge*: "Creation (...) is all in all a *sin* (s.a. - E.C.), the famous crime committed by man thus appearing like a minor version of a much more serious crime. What is our fault if not that of having followed, more or less servilely, the Creator's example? His fatality – we recognise it too well in ourselves" (Cioran 2003: 9).

<sup>29</sup> Horia 1991: 60.

expectation, awaiting his death, (en)lightened by “stars” and “signs”. *The Knight of Resignation* evokes – not only by its title – themes characteristic of Kierkegaard. The omnipotence of nothingness spreads anxiety and revolt on the faces painted by Aloisio Loredano. The fear of the Venetians, under the guise of frail sociability, is *Angst* from the work of the Danish writer:

“There was, in Aloisio Loredano’s portraits, an entire eulogy of rebellion” (Horia 1991: 77).

“These people (the Venetians, n.n.), whose ancestors had fought on all seas, were afraid, without knowing it, of an approaching death, but that was not threatening them directly, the death of their city perhaps, or of another reality which Radu-Negru failed to comprehend” (Horia 1991: 84).

At the end of *The Iliad*, there stand together – above all dispute, equally vulnerable in front of destiny and death – Priam and Achilles. Vintilă Horia’s hero reveals the same helplessness in front of the absurd and the threat of nothingness. It reconciles – on a level of values, not necessarily of action – Radu-Negru with his conjuncture adversaries:

“... the same *fear* also haunted him (Radu-Negru, n.n.), always. He looked like a character born out of Aloisio Loredano’s brush. It was not the Turks that terrified him. He was even disgusted that he had to fight them, while another danger was threatening the people, even the Turks” (Horia 1991: 77).

From Kierkegaard’s “infinite” resignation there may rise, paradoxically, faith<sup>30</sup>. A great belief, itself absurd – as long as nothing justifies it – may convert the absurd into meaning; like that of Abraham, on the point of blindly sacrificing Isaac – as God had asked him to, without explanation<sup>31</sup>. Camus explicitly refuses this divinization of the irrational, which we find at Kierkegaard, Jaspers or Shestov; his “absurd” man revolts, like Vintilă Horia’s “resigned men”. Returned to his country, Radu-Negru finds out that the Danube principedom forces, arms in hand, the will of a God hard to limber and a humiliating destiny that places him in the shadow of history. The end of the novel outlines an ethics of action. It embodies it, like an archetype of the national being, the voivode from Radu-Negru’s prophetic dream; on it “depends everything that is yet human in man”<sup>32</sup>. The novel of the Wallachian knight accounts for this conversion: from “resignation” as understood by Kierkegaard, to action. Like Kierkegaard, Vintilă Horia captures a “paradoxical becoming”<sup>33</sup>: that of a people long undecided between “retiring” from and returning to history. The return of the Voivode – of the archetypal one, in dreams, who transmits his power to the historical one, returned from exile – reminds the latter of a duty. There is, in Vintilă Horia’s novel, a throb of dignity of the national being. The feeling of the absurd no

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<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard 2005: 100.

<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard 2005: 70 – 75.

<sup>32</sup> “Notă finală”, in (Horia 1991: 171).

<sup>33</sup> Stan 2005: 10.

longer brings the consoling belief, à la Kierkegaard, but revolt and action, like at Camus<sup>34</sup>.

“He was sure that these lives, now beginning, promised something unheard of (...), that today’s unfortunate people were carrying, on their bare and feeble shoulders, the cross of an illusion that tilted towards the future. Among them, there already grew the will of the one who will not resign, for whom war, deceit and stupidity will be unworthy, obsolete weapons...” (Horia 1991: 157).

“A voivode appeared in his dream. He was dressed like a peasant, with a cap of lamb’s skin on his head, his long hair falling on his shoulders, his green, shiny cheek like that of a poisoned man. He knew that this voivode had died long time ago, centuries ago, and that he had ruled this country that was now his. His name was unknown, but he knew that the power and his own crown came from this Lord who had protected his country against other invaders, at the beginning of history. The voivode was advancing slowly and, holding a bloody sword, was signalling the army that was following him from behind” (Horia 1991: 156).

Despite a vague medieval situatedness, the “knight of resignation” remains caught in a mythical indeterminacy. His story and that of the Danube principedom – negotiated/ betrayed/ forgotten by the great empires – is added to the other novels of the exile: *God Was Born in Exile (Dieu est né en exil)*, *Persecute Boethius! (Persécutez Boèce!)*, *The Seventh Letter (La septième lettre)*, *A Tomb in Heaven (Un sepulcro en el cielo)*. With each character – Ovid, El Greco, Radu-Negru – Vintilă Horia rediscovers his biography. One of a stranger all through the end. A sort of local Ovid, exiled to the other end of Europe: Spain, not the Pontus Euxinus.

### **A gnostic mythology of Romanian exile**

Renouncing Indian studies, Ioan Petru Culianu admits to be “attracted to Gnosticism in a way that Hans Jonas (...) would have called «with existential roots»” (Culianu 2005: 16). His exile is, as he confesses, an escape from a Romanian history dominated – at the moment of leaving, in the eighth century – by the “Archons of evil”, as he himself designates the presidential pair.

“(...) for my personal interest in Gnosticism, I remain with a bitter duty to those Archons of the evil that have cast me into exile until I could find a welcoming country” (Culianu 2005: 17).

Or, Gnosticism – as Hans Jonas observed – brings a certain view upon man: the “stranger” by excellence, destined to a historical or ontological “exile”. The eponymous character

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<sup>34</sup> That somehow contradicts a statement from the *Dicționarul general al literaturii române*: “(...) the novels from the exile trilogy do not accept the sometimes tempting comparison with the existentialist doctrine” (*Dicționarul general al literaturii române*, p. 523). In fact, any meeting of Vintilă Horia with existentialism may find a source in Kierkegaard’s very work: a precursor of existentialists and reference author for the writer of *The Knight of Resignation*.

from *Ultima apariție a Alicei H. (The Last Appearance of Alice H.)* is a sort of gnostic Sophia: coming as a saviour, from the acosmic dimension of the Pleroma – from the “coloured valley” of the uncreated –, to the help of mortals; the prisoner of a condition that only the mistake of transcendence has rendered possible, humankind – with its history heading nobody knows where – has left the rails of Meaning like “a tired wagon without any rails” (Culianu 1996: 90 - 91):

“(...) she was trying to explain to me why she was there by means of some *accident*. (...) I did not know, in fact, what she wanted to say or where she had come from. But that place of *nowhere* was bathed in *soft light*. (...) She was doing what she was doing (and yet, what was she doing?) out of pure *freedom*. (...) she could withdraw to the depths from where she had come any moment” (Culianu 1996: 90 - 91).

“ « You should never offer roses », she said. « They are the secret of the body: bodies fade like roses. *Planets are clothed in roses*. (s.a. - I.P.C.) Sensuality and ephemeral, this is what they symbolize. »” (Culianu 1996: 92).

“She didn’t like roses, she was a *stranger*. (...) She saw order and beauty where I could hear the scratch of all the hinges of that *primordial wagon*. (...) She was nothing more than a gentle fire in a coloured valley. She was scared to be *there* and terrified by the wagon. She could hardly wait to return to that valley” (Culianu 1996: 96 - 97).

The imaginary of the Romanian diaspora is, to a certain extent, gnostic. (An explanation – not necessarily the only one – approaches the one mentioned above, belonging to Ioan Petru Culianu.) History follows – as Mircea Eliade explicitly says in *Nineteen Roses* – an anti-Hegelian, gnostic scenario: the Spirit does not march majestically through history, but is its prisoner. The world is created and ruled by an “evil” Demiurge. Whom Emil Cioran denounces – and ambiguously praises – with the same, never changing, almost mannerist grief<sup>35</sup>. (Cioran’s motif of the *fall into time* is also of gnostic inspiration). Elements of the gnostic imaginary also occur at Eliade, in *Ivan, Incognito at Buchenwald, In Dionysus’s Court, Two Generals’ Uniforms, In the Shadow of a Lily*. Sometimes, the gnostic myth is associated with the Orphic one; the purpose of art would be – as Mircea Eliade reiterates in several short stories – soteriological and no less political. Banished by Plato, the Poet is recalled by Mircea Eliade in the ideal city. In its Orphic hypostasis, he may be – as we may find in the short story *In Dionysus’s Court* – an efficient political actor: by taming *zoon politikon*, he transforms the crowd into polis and humanity. *In Dionysus’s Court* is an Orphic rewriting of the gnostic myth of Sophia and the “rescued Saviour”; also, a variation on the theme of the Orphic Poet, assimilated with the gnostic “stranger”. Valentin, the character from *In the Shadow of a Lily* – whose name reminds of the founder of the Valentinian gnosis – summarizes allusively the gnostic myth: “the entire world lives in exile, but this is known only by few”. In *Ivan*, there occur explicit motifs, such as *agnostos theos*, the soul captive into matter (which is related to the

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See *supra*.

gnostic and Orphic imaginary), the “Strange” God (a “camouflaged”/ “unrecognizable” Spirit). The latter – as we are warned – is neither “Paul’s God” nor that of “the Greeks”.

“(…) you were about to explain to us the meaning you give to the expression *agnostos theos*. You were looking, like at an inner screen, at the image of Ivan, somehow buried in his own body. And you were about to say that this is how God sometimes looks like, the Supreme Spirit, captured, imprisoned by Matter, blind, alienated, ignoring his own identity. But what God was that? In any case, neither Paul’s God, nor that of the Greeks. You were thinking about the gnostic myths, the Indian ideas about Spirit and Matter. (...) Spirit is *always* camouflaged by Matter (...): how am I to recognize the Spirit if it is camouflaged, that is, essentially, if it is *unrecognizable* (s.a. - M.E.)? And then we are also, all of us, (...) not just indestructible, (...), but also unrecognizable...” (Eliade 1994a: 251 – 252).

The message of such a “Stranger”-Saviour seems to be awaited by Beckett’s (anti)heroes or by K. from Kafka’s *The Castle*.

### **Instead of conclusions**

The deviant affect and ethnic difference likens Medea to Laura Brown, instances of the evil *stranger*. Albert Camus’s Meursault suffers from a schizoid personality sublimated through ethical and ontological exploitation. Firstly, it allows the association of Camus’s *stranger* with an iconic figure of the gnosis: the *estranged* who accuses – with a diagnosis à la Ugo Bianchi – a “double alienation”: from the world and from transcendence. Secondly, it is possible to associate the Camusian hero with a Kierkegaardian figure, “the knight of resignation”. The Danish thinker – a declared model for Camus – sees in him the “estranged par excellence”. Pentheus the Theban and Thomas Mann’s Aschenbach share the same experience: the revelation of *inner alterity* – censored and eventually devastating dimension of personality. This second, anarchic self carries – at Euripides, in *The Bacchae* and no less at Thomas Mann, in *Death at Venice* – a mythological mask and a psycho-analytical meaning: the “strange god”, *Dionysus lysios*, the “Liberator”.

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