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TRANSVERSAL PATHS

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THE POIETIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LABYRINTH: NOTES ON THE SYMPTOMATOLOGY OF A DYING CULTURE

How does the gap produced by the Western ratio's conquest of nature, the figure of the labyrinth as transcultural complex emerging from that gap, relate to poiesis as an act that discloses the challenge of alterity? Adrián Navigante attempts to answer this question throughout this essay, availing himself of the heritage of visionary and heterodox poets, from Friedrich Hölderlin's madness to Paul Celan's meridian, from André Breton's and D. H. Lawrence's encounter with North-American Indians to Artaud's experience with the Tarahumaras and Alain Daniélou's animistic re-enactment.

The essay is also a plaidoyer for the restitution of local values relating to forgotten or oppressed traditions in the context of a global uni-formation and shallowness.

THE HIDDEN ARCHITECTURE OF A CIVILIZATIONAL GAP

"The edifice of the universe appears to the human intellect as a labyrinth [*aedificium universi intellectui humano contemplanti instar labyrinthi est*]"[1], writes Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum* (1620). This sentence seems to limit in a certain way the philosopher's ambitious project, namely an emendation of human knowledge based on a systematic method for an adequate and complete understanding of nature. The limit is contained in the word *instar*. Bacon does not say that the universe is in itself a labyrinth. He says that it takes on that form when faced with the intellect's proclivity to explore it – or rather *exhaust it*; as if an intrinsic resistance were enacted to protect the cosmos from the 'human project'. Throughout the centuries it has been thought, or rather pre-supposed, that the form of knowledge purported by the Western *ratio* should be perfected to attain its highest goal: an unlimited expansion and conquest. Among its mainstream representatives, nobody paid attention to the intricacies of the labyrinth – for it is there that lies its significance and the very nature of the challenge that this universe presents to the human intellect. That is precisely what I intend to do in this essay: to focus on the significance of a figure that escapes the mainstream Western equation of knowledge and power, expansion and conquest, and – if taken seriously – might reshape the task of a culture. For that purpose, I have chosen to follow the footprints of poets rather than the landmarks of scientists or the innovations of technicians. I pursue no conquest. Mine is rather a pilgrimage or an idle wandering, since for me knowledge is mainly something that results from a*maze*ment, something that triggers creativity and enables relation. In that sense, I also intend to restitute a notion of *Poiesis* that has been deformed and obliterated by contemporary Western culture – despite the need to implement it as one of the precious few antidotes against the destructive civilizational enterprise that is said to 'unify' the globe.

Exploration, if related exclusively to expansion, is an activity of conquest. It implies the occupation of a territory, a delimitation of trajectories, and a progressive articulation of paths leading to a thorough, solid, and self-contained world configuration. But if the very process of 'disclosing a world' – as far as conquering human spirits are concerned – reveals itself as fraught with "ambiguous paths [*ambigua viarum*], misleading similitudes [*fallaces similitudines*], spirals and nodes [*spirae et nodi*]"[2], a gap becomes ostensible between the knowing subject (of power) and the (subjugated) object of knowledge. Can the universe and its intricacies be reduced to the point of becoming a set of 'objects'? The art of the conquering intellect is that of vivisection, and the gap that resists that operation projects an inverted mirror on which the shadow-side of the enterprise becomes visible. Modern rationality has chosen to repress the symptomatic character of that gap. On the level of cultural production, this project has been related to the universalist didactics of the West: the mode of being resulting from that rationality had to be exported to the rest of the globe. In the commodified world of global capitalism, the term 'management' epitomizes the highest acceleration and the lowest form of that expansive *ratio*: instrumental rationality and cultural industry[3]. In the public sphere, it implies the reduction of

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1 Francis Bacon: *Novum Organum* (ed. by Thomas Fowler), Praefatio, Oxford 1889, p. 165.

2 Francis Bacon: *Ibidem.*

3 I am not postulating a direct continuity of universalism and globalization, since the universalist project implied notions of humanism, freedom and justice that have been to a great extent abandoned with the consolidation of economy as an all-encompassing 'science' ruling over private and public affairs. However, both the philosophy of liberalism and the principles of modern economy – conflated in the work of Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith – participate in the type of rationality that characterizes modern Western thought and share its expansionist tendency. It is true that the instrumental character of that rationality has been many times depicted as an opposite pole to the real *desideratum* of universalization, 'critical thinking', but even that opposition is not radical at all, since critical and instrumental rationality are two sides of the complex phenomenon of 'Western progress' – its ideological presentation as a 'worldwide civilizational phenomenon' shared by

the social, political, historical, anthropological, religious, philosophical, and artistic dimensions of human existence (with its innumerable nuances) to a 'mechanical functioning'[4], where the gap of contradiction, paradox, singularity, difference, otherness, intensity, and mystery is concealed by a homogenized pattern of repetition. The figure of the labyrinth, on the contrary, displays a complex dynamics emerging from that gap and points to an architectural cartography that transforms the differential space from a mere *quantité négligeable* into a cultural and even ontological challenge. Its hidden dimension – that is, what escapes the expansion of modern rationality with its increasingly instrumental forms of conquest – compels its explorers to adopt another attitude. *Openness to otherness and a new modality of relation*. What kind of world can we con-figure if we constructively accept differences, ambivalences, detours, multiple paths and perspectives, as well as the possibility of being challenged by other (human and non-human) modes of existence? Surely not the world of mechanical rationality, dehumanized technocracy, and axiomatic commodification. Maybe a world of *poietic* dignity – although that is a risky bet and in no way an assurance of 'salvation'. Our dying world needs the *Poiesis* of the labyrinth as a refuge and a possible *life* alternative in times of civilizational collapse.

Can the universe and its intricacies be reduced to the point of becoming a set of 'objects'? The art of the conquering intellect is that of vivisection, and the gap that resists that operation projects an inverted mirror on which the shadow-side of the enterprise becomes visible.

THE VICISSITUDES OF AN IMMANENT 'OTHERNESS'

In his lecture of 1943 on Heraclitus' doctrine of Logos, Martin Heidegger attempted to disentangle the notion of *poiesis* from the historical superimpositions of metaphysical and scientific thinking[5]. His remarks on the expression ἀληθέα λέγειν καὶ ποιεῖν κατὰ φύσιν (literally "to say the truth and act according to [the] nature [of things]") in the Heraclitan fragment 112 are worthy of consideration. According to Heidegger, *aletheia* is not to be understood as 'truth' in the sense of an adequation between language and reality, but as "that which is unconcealed"

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instrumental as well as by critical rationalists.

4 That this 'functioning' is perfectible does not mean that its intrinsically mechanical character can ever reach a form of creativity free from quantification and interchangeability. In other words: no technical revolution, neither the worldwide web nor artificial intelligence, can compensate for the symbolic impoverishment of human life that this modality of instrumental rationality implies, which is concretized in the grammar of industrial technology reaching the affective and aesthetic layers of individual existence (Cf. Bernard Stiegler: *De la misère symbolique*, Paris 2013, pp. 13-20). Since this is the undeniably dominant tendency on a global level, the alternative spaces will always be framed in this panoptic design, even if their counter-configuration is inspired by a cultural architecture challenging our dominant *ratio*.

5 The metaphysical interpretation of the arts is clearly summarized in Heidegger's lecture on Hölderlin's Hymn "Der Ister" (1942), where he critically points to the division between perceptible natural events [*wahrnehmbare Vorkomnisse der Natur*] and the non-sensible or abstract meaning [*nichtsinnliche Bedeutung*] of poetic images [*dichterische Bilder*] (cf. Martin Heidegger: *Hölderlin's Hymne "Der Ister" (GA 53)*, Frankfurt 1993, p. 17). This division between sensible, sensory or perceptible nature and abstract, suprasensory or idealized spirit is at the root of literary devices and procedures such as allegory, symbol and metaphor. It is supported by the metaphysical gesture of a division between *aesthesis* and *noesis*, which for Heidegger begins with Plato and characterizes "every conception and interpretation of the world in the West [*alle abendländische Weltauffassung und Weltauslegung*]" (Martin Heidegger: *Ibidem*, p. 19), including the notion of art as *techne* and therefore the inability of grasping the living reality of poetic works. Heidegger's critique of the historico-literary approach to poetry [*literarhistorische Erforschung der Dichtung*] in the human sciences follows the same logic. In his lecture on Hölderlin's Hymn "Andenken" (1941/1942), he criticizes the ambition of historical objectivity as an abstract separation of what is constituted as aesthetic object from the living reality of the work (cf. Martin Heidegger: *Hölderlin's Hymne "Andenken" (GA 52)*, Frankfurt 1992, pp. 2-5).

by "an initial force of nomination"[6]. The verb *legein* does not mean 'speak' or 'say' something, but 'gather' [*sammeln*] in the sense of 'rendering consistent' or 'safe-keeping' [*verwahren*] what is (being) unconcealed. As to *poiein*, the usual translation 'to act' in the sense of 'doing' or 'making' can never do justice to Heraclitus' thinking. Heidegger opts for the verb 'disclose' in the sense of 'bringing out of concealment' [*hervor-bringen*][7]. *Poiesis* would be a way of 'holding to' or 'dwelling in' the disclosure of being before any further determination leads that fundamental experience toward clearly delimited subjective and objective grounds. Disclosure is the act [*poiesis*] of emerging out of a self-growing source which the Greeks named *physis*. This 'act' is not carried out by any human being, though; it is primarily an event. Some humans–so-called poets – can existentially articulate that radical opening and consciously participate in the eventful emergence of being that bears the name *physis*. This means, among other things, that the poet is not engulfed (like the rest of society) by the alluring and appalling tendency to mechanized life-rhythms, utilitarian mediation, superfluous wishes, collective manipulation, and truncated relations. Heidegger's view on *Poiesis* constitutes a most significant immanent critique of the mainstream project in the West: the reductive progression from metaphysics to epistemology and the subjugation of epistemic thinking to modern technology for the sake of domination.

From the mainstream perspective of this 'progression', poetry belongs to the sphere of 'fiction' – as opposed to 'factual reality'. Fiction is invented language, purposely rendered alien (i.e. inadequate) to reality because it stems from the subjective (or purely individual) field of experience. Heidegger challenges this view by showing that it is the outcome of an epochal crisis in which thinking is severed from life and life is confined to its purely biological stratum. If life is not confined to the logic of natural science, there is much more to consider in effective reality as what the Latin word *res* offers to thinking (and life in general)[8]. In this sense, the dichotomic pair 'fact-fiction' is untenable, since the articulation of effective reality encompasses and demands much more than what is rendered by its epistemic classification and technical manipulation. The world we have inherited is not reality *at large*, but one very limited version of it that prescribes its portion as the only adequate vision of the whole.

The place of *Poiesis* in modern Western thought cannot be other than marginal. Poetry, not as merely textual production but as a life-engagement codified in a singular form of aesthetic production, is *the place of the immanent other*: it embodies a reverse-side of mainstream discursive bodies (still visible and even prominent in social contexts of the past[9]) as

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6 Das Wort [...] ἀληθέα bedeutet wörtlich und meint im Wesen *das Unverborgene* [...]. Wir müssen [...] darauf achten, daß der Spruch in der Zeit des vormetaphysischen Denkens gesprochen, zu einer Zeit, da auch die Worte, und zumal die Grundworte, *ihre ursprüngliche Nennkraft* entfalteten" (Martin Heidegger: *Heraklit. Der Anfang des abendländischen Denkens, Logik: Heraklits Lehre vom Logos (GA 55)*, Frankfurt 1994, p. 361, my emphasis).

7 Heidegger: *Ibidem*, p. 367.

8 The German distinction between 'effective reality' [*Wirklichkeit*] and reality as a result of its objective determination [*Realität*], is in this sense very enlightening. Effective reality implies a constitutive and dynamic relation between the historical (and therefore never fully objectifiable) aspect of reality and the temporal consciousness intertwined with its texture in a continuous and far-reaching process of understanding. This is clearly expressed by Gadamer in his critique of historical objectivity: "Whoever is certain of a total absence of prejudices guaranteed by the objective character of his procedure denies his own historical conditionality and turns out to be violently subjected to an uncontrolled dominance of such prejudices" (cf. Hand-Georg Gadamer: *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (*Werke 1*), Tübingen 1990, p. 366.

9 If we think of the cohesive social role of poetry in Homeric society (with the foundational epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*), classical Greek and Latin culture (from Aeschylean tragedy to Virgil's poetry), the Middle Ages (Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarca) and early modernity (William Shakespeare and John Milton), the role of 'outsider' ascribed to the poet from the Romantic period (from William Wordsworth's denunciation of society as artificial – as opposed to the 'nature' of poetry - to Lord Byron's propensity to scandal as a 'scansion of otherness' – whether in libertine sex or in independence wars) to contemporary society (from Antonin Artaud's madness to Paul Celan's suicide) presents a dramatic contrast. It also shows that the received and established opinion about poetry – and arts in general – today as activities with no social function apart from aesthetic

well as a (non-)place of potential life alternatives to the dominant mode of existence – the little portion that claims to be the whole – in the present world-configuration. It is because this immanent 'otherness' could find no support in its own social body that some lucid or visionary poets have sought – well or badly – existential alternatives in cultures that are distant – whether geographically or historically. Prosaic judgements on those detours have always been hostile. They apply disqualifying commonplaces to the poetic enterprise, such as 'exoticism', 'naïve identification', 'subjective projection', or 'sheer invention'. Almost all of them overlook the fact that *Poiesis* (as a space of singularity that resists homogenization and mechanical reproduction) offers to those searchers an indefinable bond with the culture of the other(s). One of the keys to transcultural understanding lies in a consideration of those spaces of resonance, which cannot be determined, classified, or explained away with the ready-made tools of intellectual domination.

Those *trans*cultural spaces are not so discontinuous and inchoative as Heidegger's differential Greco-German axis and its invisible thread from Heraclitus to Hölderlin. Heraclitus' obscurity was the exercise of his style as the embodiment of insight; Hölderlin's obscurity was the acceptance of madness as a refuge to retain the divine echoes in his own frequency field faced with the prospect of Europe as an imminent wasteland[10]. Part of the crisis of contemporary Western culture is due to the obstinacy of its cultural elites to retrieve discontinuous past values which can only be conjured theoretically and have no power of collective transformation. The insistence of precious few thinkers like Heidegger on a radically differential space can be seen as the only remaining epochal scansion pointing to an alternative modality of being-in-the-world. But how can this modality be realized if the configuration is lacking, and no bridge can be built between the ontological difference (where every attempt at symbolization fails) and the ontic field (where beings are symbolically distributed and interconnected)? On a socio-historical level, the differential space progressively loses its consistency as well as its heroic (or rather tragic) *raison d'être*, while the rest of society is engulfed in an unprecedented scientific, technical, and managerial 'machination'[11]. Paul Celan's poetology is perhaps the most lucid elaboration of this situation, at the same time an epochal diagnosis and testimony of an inner struggle foredoomed to failure. In his acceptance speech for the Büchner Prize, *Der Meridian*, Celan refers to the obscurity and strangeness of poetry, paradoxically characterized as art-less and art-free. Poetry is a word against the grain, a breath-turn[12], and as such it is exemplarily actualized in free-death – where the breath-turn becomes a death-rattle, and the differential direction (or deviation, or radical subtraction) a pure expression of destiny. The movement announced by Celan's poetology is stylistically realized in his poetry and dramatically accomplished with his suicide. It marks the destiny of the subtractive space in Western thought, the vicissitude of the counter-light that courageously flickered before the expanding shadow of the world-conquering *logos* and its atrocities.

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delight or moral degeneration is, upon historical and transcultural scrutiny, an anomaly rather than a universal rule. It suffices to consider any other part of the world in which the process of 'Westernization' did not ravage local traditions and their modes of living away from the alienation of absolute quantification, reproduction of profit, and increasing emotional, intellectual, and spiritual shallowness.

10 Cf. Giorgio Agamben: "his [Hölderlin's] conception of madness had nothing to do with our idea of a mental disease. It was rather a possible or maybe necessary dwelling-place [*qualcosa che si poteva o si doveva abitare*]" (*La follia di Hölderlin: Cronaca di una vita abitante 1806-1843*, Torino 2021, p. 21).

11 For the notion of machination [*Machenschaft*] as a process in which beings are integrated in a "relation of non-relationality", cf. Martin Heidegger: *Beiträge zur Philosophie. Vom Ereignis (GA 65*), Frankfurt 2003, pp. 131-134.

12 Cf. Paul Celan: *Der Meridian* (*Tübinger Ausgabe*, ed. by Jürgen Wertheimer), Frankfurt 1999, p. 7.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE GAP: FIRST STEPS TOWARD THE LABYRINTH

Celan's poetological detour in search of an encounter that might counteract the alienating effects of an artistic – and cultural – wasteland bears the sign of a utopia. But what does this term mean in the context of his essay? It has little to do with fantastic thinking, abstract ideals, or unrealistic wishes. It is rather the effort to preserve a radically differential character in the poet's exercise of 'world disclosure'. What does the poem 'say' if metaphors, tropes, and other figures of speech deemed necessary and functional in the classical conception of literature are led *ad absurdum*?[13] What kind of world remains in that space (if any)? Celan's poetic work deals with the primordially repressed in Western culture, 'the other' (in the form of the Jew)[14] that *must be annihilated* to ensure the identitary consistency of a folk, a nation, a continent, or more heroically: a European destiny. Out of the subtractive space of the primordially repressed, the poet attempts to build another topography, and in that attempt, he finds "something immaterial but earthly, terrestrial"[15], which acts as a connecting figure between the opposite poles of the absent homeland and the impossible return. The figure of the meridian is what consolidates the poet's exile and at the same time consoles him in his journey along "this impossible path, this path of the impossible"[16].

Celan's meridian as a flickering line between two unreachable poles is the minimal amount of consistency that *Poiesis* can offer to render another world visible among the ruins of Western modernity. However, it is an enlightening indication, since the poet's differential scansion leaves the door open to take another turn instead of accentuating his geo-dynamics of fading-out and effacement[17]. If we add an equator to the meridian, we gain symmetry and obtain the first sketchy cartography of the globe: a cross, through which different areas become perceptible. The intersecting lines of the meridian and the equator delineate the emergence of a world. Not the world conceived or measured by Europe, not the world as Europe's expansion or contraction, unification or fragmentation, but *an otherworld*. A plurality of cultures, discourses, habits, and tendencies which cannot be predetermined or pigeonholed in the mechanical reproduction of the similar or the already-prescribed as 'normal' or 'commonsensical'. An alternative to the *widespread commonplaces*.

The cross is a figure that, long before adopting its Christian significance, served as the basis for a mysterious architecture, the labyrinth[18], in which dancing patterns, ritual ceremo-

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13 Cf. Paul Celan: *Der Meridian*, p. 10. The expression *ad absurdum*, used in *Der Meridian* when Celan refers to the topography of the poem ("Der Ort, wo alle Tropen und Metaphern ad absurdum geführt warden wollen"), should be understood in the etymological sense of the Latin term *absurdum*, d. h. at the same time 'discordant' (with the rest of the literary and cultural productions) and 'silence-dawned' [*ab-surdum*] in the sense of something emerging from a mute source. This radical poetic subtraction is an attempt to give the voice to those who cannot give expression to their suffering, not only because they are dead but mainly because of the desecrating way in which they were murdered (his thematization of the *Shoah*).

14 This aspect of the crisis of Western culture was magnificently exposed by Jean-François Lyotard in his book *Heidegger et « les juifs »* (1988), in which the French philosopher shows quite convincingly that the problem of Western culture's having forgetten "the question of being" (Heidegger) is not its ultimate cultural challenge, since Western thought, including that of Heidegger's ontological clearance, symptomatically forgot a dimension of otherness incarnated by "the Jews", in the face of which even the fundamental question of being appears as part and parcel of an ideology of homogenization and murderous dominance.

15 Cf. Paul Celan: *Ibidem*, p. 12.

16 Paul Celan: *Ibidem*.

17 Such accentuation cannot lead but to a fading-out of the meridian line, that is, to mental illness and self-destruction. Throughout his adult life, Celan experienced more than once psychiatric intervention (which plunged him even further into disorientation and hopelessness), and he ended up committing suicide. But his meridian line was not fully erased. His poetic work is an indicator of potentially alternative lines of thinking and writing which can be added to his meridian.

18 The cross is the basis of the classical type of Labyrinth identified with the ancient Palace of Cnossos (V century BCE), which is the oldest variant of this architectonic figure in Western culture. From that central cross emerge the four branches sketching its puzzling spiral-like structure (cf. Malek Abbou (ed.): *Les Labyrin-*

nies, fertility cults, and other performative ways of dealing with the surrounding living reality[19] imposed themselves upon humans, keeping them away from the logic of abstract thinking, instrumental development, and compulsive manipulation of objective reality. The architecture of the labyrinth is mysterious because, as Karl Kerényi points out, it cannot be unraveled or solved like a (scientific) problem; instead, it "demands to be experienced, worshipped, and incorporated in one's own life"[20]. Wouldn't we gain a broader perspective on the labyrinth and come closer, in a way, to the mystery of its architecture, if we consider poets who venture a step toward radical alterity *beyond* the logic of differential immanence purported by authors like Hölderlin and Celan? For it is in those authors that a *poietic* specificity becomes significant.

A poet's venturing into radical alterity has little to do with travel experiences serving literary – or worse: pseudo-ethnological – purposes. In 1945, André Breton visited the Hopi reservation in Arizona and kept a notebook on his experience. What transpires in those notes is for the most part disappointing. His record on the Snake-Antilope dance, a powerful sixteen-day ceremony of the Hopis in Arizona, misses the relevance that that encounter could have had as testimony of *poietic* disclosure going in the opposite direction to the abyss of Western civilization at the end of the Second World War. This is not typical of Breton, who was very attentive to non-European resonances with surrealism in Africa and the Caribbean, fascinated by 'primitive art', and resistant to colonial exhibitions in France, and who would later declare that the dignity and the inalienable genius of the Nord-American Indigenous populations stands in shocking contrast with the miserable conditions in which they lived[21]. The Snake-Antilope dance is a rhythmically embodied cartography of the labyrinth. This fact did not escape Breton, who succinctly points to the chthonic aspect of the dance (hitting the soil with the foot to mark the rhythm), the relationship of the four-time entrance and exit of the dancers with the cardinal points, and the density of the bi-directional spiral-like figure in the dancing pattern[22]. However, his explicit reference to the Labyrinth remains scanty. It does not take the intricacy and significance of the dance into account[23] but limits itself to a vague analogy of the entrance and exit of the dancers with "the Greek symbol, [the] Labyrinth [...], which designates the Hopi village"[24]. Instead of connecting his poetic insight with the amazing submission of the Indians to the non-human presences participating in the ritual in a humble attempt to grasp something of that challenging alterity, Breton takes his pad and starts writing down notes in a nonchalant gesture mindful of colonial ethnologists rather than of visionary poets. His pad is confiscated by one of the Hopis – a reaction fully understandable in that context. Breton's remark completes the disheartening picture: "I don't regret anything, [...] much as I admire Hopi *art,* I do not feel myself obliged to respect

Paul Celan's notion of meridian as a flickering line between two unreachable poles is the minimal amount of consistency that Poiesis can offer to render another world visible among the ruins of Western modernity. The poet's differential scansion leaves the door open to take another turn instead of accentuating his geo-dynamics of fading-out and effacement.

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thes, Paris 2023, p. 34). Karl Kerényi points to the clay tablets of Mesopotamian excavations dating back to the III millennium BCE as an earlier variant, but that variant is no Western example. In those tables, the entrails of the sacrificed animals appear as a spiral building and bear divinatory significance (cf. Karl Kerényi: *Labyrinth Studien*, Zürich 1950, p. 14).

19 Cf. Hermann Kern: *Labyrinthe. Erscheinungsformen und Deutungen, 5000 Jahre Gegenwart eines Urbildes*, München 1999, pp. 48-56.

20 Karl Kerényi: *Labyrinth Studien*, p. 11.

21 Cf. Henri Béhar: *André Breton. Le grand indésirable*, Paris 1990, p. 361

22 Cf. André Breton: *Carnet de voyage chez les Indiens Hopi* (*Œuvres Complètes III*,) Paris 1999, p. 194.

23 The importance of the drum is wholly omitted, as well as the identification of the dancers with non-human presences. Such aspects had already been noticed and emphasized back in 1939 by the remarkable art historian Aby Warburg (cf. Aby Warburg, A Lecture on Serpent Ritual, in: *Journal of the Warburg Institute, Vol. 2, N°4* (1939), pp. 277-292, especially p. 282.

24 André Breton: *Carnet de voyage chez les Indiens Hopi*, p. 194.

their *religion*"[25].

Ethnocentric attitudes to alterity are not always so miserable. Some of them turn out to be inspiring and even capable of indirectly restituting part of the value buried by centuries of prejudices. D. H. Lawrence's 1923 essay "Indians and an Englishman" is an example of this paradox. The author was fascinated with North America and the possibility of a world that might offer an alternative to the ravages of modern industrialism – which Lawrence, a working-class author, had experienced in his own family –, but he was honest enough to thematize the clash of cultures and show that such contrast was not theory but a lived experience (clash of ideas, but also of habits, feelings, impressions, sensibilities): "I am no ethnologist. The point is, what is the feeling that passes from an Indian to me, when we meet. We are both men, but how do we feel together? I shall never forget that first evening when I first came into contact with Red Men, away in the Apache country. It was not what I had thought it would be. It was something of a shock"[26]. Lawrence's shock is a displaced one. It does not involve two contemporary cultures, but an opposition of past and present – an evolutionist prejudice typical of his time, which by the way affected not only artists but also ethnologists. Primitive cultures represent 'the archaic instincts', and modern culture 'the progress of reason'. But since modern culture has produced industrialism, social alienation, and a pathological repression of instincts (the shining example of which was Victorian society)[27], the word 'primitive' means for Lawrence something at the same time unsettling and fascinating, the reverberation of a retrospectively dignified wildness: "I don't want to live again the tribal mysteries my blood has lived long since. I don't want to know as I have known, in the tribal exclusiveness. But every drop of me trembles still alive to the old sound, every thread in my body quivers to the frenzy of the old mystery [...] I stand on the far edge of their fire light and am neither denied nor accepted"[28]. This in-between place, or not-still place of the foreigner who dares to fill the void of the differential with an ambiguous opening to a living cultural alterity, is a step forward in the construction of the labyrinth. Fantasy corrects the factual, and despite its attached prejudices, the isolated individuality is cast open and delineates further coordinates to articulate the gap. Suddenly, there is space for the – non objectifiable – externality of the other, and there is even *a field* of the other. Hence, another exploration is necessary, the starting point of which is situated outside *all* dominant parameters – including those of 'ontological difference' and 'radical subtraction' – to render the emerging relations as symmetric as possible.

For D. H. Lawrence, primitive cultures represent 'the archaic instincts', and modern culture 'the progress of reason'. But since modern culture has produced industrialism, social alienation, and a pathological repression of instincts, the word 'primitive' means the reverberation of a retrospectively dignified wildness.

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25 André Breton: *Ibidem*, p. 197. A question that imposes itself is whether Breton had any grasp of that 'religion'. In an essay on the same subject, D. H. Lawrence (who will occupy my thoughts in what follows) writes the following: "[The snake-dance] as a religious ceremonial: well, you can either be politely tolerant [...] or you must have a spark of understanding of the sort of religion implied" (D. H. Lawrence: The Hopi Snake Dance, in: *Mornings in Mexico and Other Essays* (ed. By Virginia Crosswhite Hyde), Cambridge 2014, pp. 79-94, quote p. 81).

26 D. H. Lawrence: Indians and an Englishman, in: *Mornings in Mexico and Other Essays*, pp. 111-121, quote p. 116.

27 For Lawrence, the sphere of the instinctual was not something that must be surpassed for humans to achieve their dignity, but something to be retrieved to step out of religious and modern alienation, which consists in a separation of consciousness from instinct (i. e. the true unconscious): "What then is the true unconscious? It is not a shadow cast from the mind. It is the spontaneous life-motive in every organism" [...] "The Word cannot be the beginning of life. It is the *end* of life, that which falls shed. The mind is the dead end of life" (D. H. Lawrence: *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious and Fantasia of the Unconscious*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 15 and 42, respectively.

28 D. H. Lawrence: Indians and an Englishman, p. 120.

THE DOUBLE-EDGED AXE: VISIONARY TURN AND ETHNOLOGICAL SUBVERSION

Antonin Artaud carried out what I would call 'a visionary turn', not only in the relation between the modern artist of the old continent (Europe) and the archaic wisdom of the new continent (America), but also by conceiving the *poietic* breath-turn not as a forgotten difference in the European past but as a *trans*cultural breakthrough at the antipodes of the colonial ideology of his time[29]. Despite the proliferation of scholarly works on different aspects of his literary production, Artaud remains in the shadows, mainly because his 'madness' is emphasized to the point of discrediting the value of his dazzling insights, reducing his extremely lucid cultural critique and his restitution of an art of transformation (in place of entertainment)[30] to the status of a personal struggle against his own demons. Ronald Laing summarizes this medicalized obliteration of the *poietic* voice in our culture when he quotes Artaud's conviction that "a sick society invented psychiatry to defend itself against the investigations of certain visionaries" and concludes: "this is psychosis. I had been trained to diagnose myself psychotic"[31].

Artaud never denied his status of *patiens,* that is, somebody who suffers and needs healing. But healing was for him the contrary of cure in the sense of a re-adaptation to the social environment, since in his view there was a fundamental perversion in the 'normality' shaped by modern European culture[32]. Madness was for Artaud a sign of healthy resistance to that sick normality, but the individual paid a high price for carrying upon his shoulders the collective shadow of his time, giving it expression with a dissonant voice. The voice of art makes the artist a cultural scapegoat[33], but Artaud's ultimate purpose was not to be crucified. If poetry is the ultimate expression of art, the poet is the sickest being, but that extreme dissonance appears in his view as the possibility of a *trans*-cultural breakthrough. The embodied core of his *poietic* vision is not to be found – as many readers think – in a retrieval of the ancient Gnosis, or an affinity with old Pagan mysteries, or a readaptation of medieval alchemy, but in a reversal of a whole world-configuration dictated by non-human agency. No diachronic exploration can achieve this reversal. The testimony of Artaud's alchemical odyssey becomes exemplary in his poetically recorded experience with the Tarahumara people in Western Sierra Madre, Mexico.

The first indication of Artaud's visionary spirit in the context of his experience in the new continent can be well expressed in Jungian terms: whereas his fellow artists valued the 'spirit of the times', he pointed to the 'spirit of the depths'[34]. His contemporaries (André Breton, Louis

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29 The colonial ideology of the time was not only present in ethnology but also in Marxism. The critique of Marxism in the 1930s is, as we shall see, a central subject of dissent between Artaud and other European artists and intellectuals (including Breton) who entertained a cultural relation with North America (Mexico and/or the United States) and had the revolutionary Western model in mind as the only hope for those countries.

30 Artaud's *practical* alchemy, which pervades the totality of writings, has been fully ignored in the reception of his work. A precious exception to this institutionalized denial is Françoise Bonardel's book *Artaud ou la fidelité à l'infini*, Paris 1987.

31 Ronald Laing: *Wisdom, Madness and Folly. The Making of a Psychiatrist*, London 1986, p. 13. Laing made himself an outcast among his colleagues for reading not only Artaud, but also authors like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Joyce, on which he comments the following: "I dreaded much more than ever becoming like them" (Ronald Laing, Ibidem, p. 12). Of course, when he says 'them' he does not refer to the authors he liked but to his work colleagues!

32 This is clearly expressed in different passages of his poem Les malades et les médecins: "The disease is a condition / Health is one other, only uglier / I mean more cowardly and pettier [...] I have been sick all my life and I beg to remain so. / For the states of deprivation / have revealed me much more about / the plethora of my power than the petit-bourgeois belief in 'good health is enough' (Antonin Artaud: *Œuvres complètes XXII*, Paris 1986, pp. 67 (my translation).

33 Cf. Antonin Artaud: L'anarchie sociale de l'art, in: *Œuvres complètes VIII*, p. 287.

34 "The spirit of this time would like to hear of use and value. I also thought this way, and my humanity still thinks this way [...]. But I did not consider that the spirit of the depths from time immemorial and for all the future possesses a greater power [...]. The spirit of the depths took my understanding and all my knowledge and placed them at the service of the inexplicable and the paradoxical" (C. G. Jung: *The Red Book. Liber Novus*, New

Aragon, Paul Éluard) saw Marxism – and by extension the Mexican revolution – as a model of social change and universal hope. Artaud inverted the terms: "Where modern Mexico copies Europe, I contend that it is the European civilization that should benefit from Mexico's secret. The rationalist culture of Europe has failed, and I have come to the land of Mexico seeking the basis of a magical culture that can still emerge from the forces of the Indigenous soil"[35]. Artaud's purpose of returning to the pre-Columbian tradition of Mexico was no metaphor or flight of fancy. Apart from the political lucidity contained in that program[36], an existential equation had to be borne in mind. As a poet who inevitably had to suffer the 'madness of difference' in a society with a pathological form of normality, Artaud looked for healing through reinsertion in another context leading to a reeducation of perception and cognition. This is in the first place an individual task (the poet must be treated by Indigenous shamans, not by Western doctors[37]); however, its consequences imply a gradual reconfiguration of his artistic and social environment, and a new vision of 'the human'[38]. Under the guidance of the Tarahumaras, Artaud was determined to experience a qualitative reversal of ontological and existential coordinates.

The embodied core of Artaud's poietic vision is not to be found in a retrieval of the ancient Gnosis, or an affinity with old Pagan mysteries, or a readaptation of medieval alchemy, but in a reversal of a whole world-configuration dictated by non-human agency.

Breton selectively embraced the art of the Hopis but rejected their religion, keeping a safe distance from any deep existential challenge. Lawrence instinctively resonated with the 'old tribal fire' of the Pueblos and Apaches but declared the existence of an incommensurable consciousness gap between them and the white man[39]. Artaud reverses both postures in his experience with the Tarahumaras. As opposed to Breton, he participates in "the rite of Ciguri [Peyote]", detaching himself from the secular idea of art and embracing "the summit of the Tarahumara religion"[40]. As opposed to Lawrence, he fully accepts the condition to bridge the gap between two incommensurable worlds, a "rite of annihilation", in which "the old Mexican chief struck me [with his sword] in order to cast my consciousness open"[41]. At this point begins

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York: London 2009, pp. 119-120.

35 Antonin Artaud: Surréalisme et révolution, in: *Œuvres complètes VIII*, p. 183.

36 Artaud knew that Mexico had been converted to Marxism, but that Indigenous cultures did not play any role in the revolutionary project, or – even worse – the preaching of Marxism was a second conversion they had to go through (cf. Florence de Méredieu: *C'était Antonin Artaud*, Paris 2006, pp. 567-569).

37 This phrase should be taken, in the first place, literally. When Artaud arrived in Mexico, he was in a terrible state (withdrawal symptoms, hyper-anxiety, premature ageing), and he puts his hopes in the Indigenous wisdom to help him out of that hole. However, the idea of the poet being healed by the shaman also points to a possible transcultural intersection of poetic genius (as a differential component in the modern West) and shamanic wisdom (as the cohesive factor of traditional Indigenous societies). A 'healed poet' can broaden the horizon of Western culture toward a new gaze on radical alterity devoid of the religious and evolutionist prejudices of the past.

38 "We expect from Mexico a new concept of revolution, and a new concept of the human, which will serve to feed, with his magical life, this ultimate form of humanism being born in France with a spirit diametrically opposed to that of the XVI century" (Antonin Artaud: Premiers contacts avec la révolution mexicaine, in: *Œuvres complètes VIII*, p. 239). It is obvious that his comment on the magical life introduces quite another dimension to the usual expectations in the social revolution. For Artaud the only possible 'revolution' (that is, a rotation back to the origins) could come from the red soil of the Indigenous land and not from the Marxist ideology.

39 "The Indian way of consciousness is different from and fatal to our way of consciousness. Our way of consciousness is different from and fatal to the Indian's. The two ways, the two streams, are never to be united" (D. H. Lawrence, Indians and Entertainment, in: *Mornings in Mexico and other Essays*, pp. 59-68, quote p. 61).

40 Antonin Artaud: Le rite du Peyotl chez les Tarahumaras, in: *Œuvres completes IX*, Paris 1979, pp. 11-32, quote p. 16.

41 Antonin Artaud: *Ibidem*, p. 11 (my translation). Helen Weaver translates the phrase *rite d'anéantissement* as "rite of humiliation" (Antonin Artaud: *The Peyote Dance*, New York 1976, p. 18). In my opinion this rendering is not adequate, because the sense of 'being struck' does not mainly refer to a submission to the authority of the Tutuguri priest but to the annihilation of the modality of (white) consciousness that would

the poet's ethnological subversion. Artaud was no professional ethnologist, and he didn't want to be one. His gesture is ethno-logical in quite another sense than what is usually understood by that term. Artaud aims at an embodied reception of the 'ethnic religion' of the Tarahumaras and – within that process – a transformation of his own inherited *logos* (which is that of mainstream Western culture). This would coincide with a renewal of his *poietic* vitality and a restitution of his physical and mental health. Professional ethnologists, as a rule, don't explore the field like Artaud. They enter the 'native space' with a will-to-objectivity that withstands every cultural shock and enables them to describe, analyze, and judge all those processes and experiences *in a functional way*. Ultimately the supremacy of the Western *logos* in its modern epistemic emplacement remains intact[42].

Artaud did not go to the Tarahumaras to describe their observable institutional behavior but to inscribe his gaze in the invisible sociality of their ritual performance and articulate the healing dislocation resulting from it. His writing follows the voices (used as testimonies) of the Ciguri priests as well as the movements and emotions that radiate from them, all of them stemming from the non-human intelligence with which they interact. The transmission of knowledge among the Tarahumaras is not intellectual and abstract but living and embodied: "they obey on the one hand a physical tradition, and on the other hand the secret commands dictated to them by the Peyote [...]. I mean that they do what the plant tells them to do"[43]. It is in the apparent immediacy and spontaneity of the Tarahumaras' obedience to the plant that the richness and complexity of their ritual becomes visible. But in order to *see* that complexity, the participants must be granted the eyes of Ciguri – a total reversal which enables them to grasp the sense of postures, gestures, dance patterns and prayers in a much broader context of interconnection and embeddedness.

Artaud's confrontation with alterity is not reduced to an encounter with an Indigenous tribe and the attempt to adhere to part of their living tradition. It consists in a *vision* whose first moment requires being spiritually torn and engulfed in agony, "after which one feels like turned around and reversed to the other side of things"[44]. This may be called a mystical moment, but not in the sense in which one would usually characterize such experience[45]. There is no apophatic or ineffable influx, but an ecstatic opening with a progressive articulation of the reverse-side: "Things which seem to have emerged from what was your spleen, your liver, your heart, or your lungs break away and burst in the atmosphere [...] shaped like the letters of a very ancient and mysterious alphabet chewed by an enormous mouth, but terrifyingly repressed, proud, illegible, jealous of its invisibility"[46]. This is Artaud's entrance into the labyrinth: a resolute *katabasis*[47]. He deals with the repressed, conjures its power, and adopts the logic of the reverse side, in which a sort of *imagination vera* shapes the real: "this Fantastic is of

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otherwise block every connection with the healing and illuminating power of Ciguri during the rite.

42 The reproduction of knowledge in the field of anthropology consists in the translation of marginal, alien, or unknown modes of being-in-the-world into dominant, hegemonic, or culturally digestible regimes of discourse. As a general tendency, it is only with the so-called 'ontological turn in anthropology' at the end of the XX century that certain deeply embedded ethnocentric traits of the academic reproduction of knowledge were partially contested and other (non-Western and non-scholarly) voices began to be heard. Of course, there have been exceptions to the rule, even before the consolidation of the 'ontological turn'. Heterodox anthropology, beyond the widely discussed issue of 'going native', also moved dangerously close to literary or poetic subversion – it suffices to think of authors like Zora Neale Hurston and Hubert Fichte.

43 Antonin Artaud: Le rite du Peyotl chez les Tarahumaras, in: *Œuvres completes IX*, p. 13.

44 Antonin Artaud: *Ibidem*, p. 25.

45 The discourse of mysticism is dominated by Christian theology, and Artaud seems to avail himself of such discourse when he refers to "the very Spirit of Ciguri" (Antonin Artaud: Le rite du Peyotl chez les Tarahumaras, in: *Œuvres completes IX*, p. 26).

46 Antonin Artaud: *Ibidem*.

47 For the analogy of the *descensus ad inferos* and the itinerary of a labyrinth, cf. Paolo Santarcangeli: *Nekya. La discesa dei poeti ad inferi*, Milano 1980, p. 16. Santarcangeli underlines the chthonic aspect of the labyrinth paths and the danger involved in the itinerary, which can push the explorer into madness or physical death (cf. *Ibidem*, p. 19).

noble quality, its disorder is only apparent. In fact, it obeys an order that is fashioned mysteriously and on a level which normal consciousness does not reach, but which Ciguri allows us to reach. This is the very mystery of all poetry"[48].

ETHNO-POETIC RE-CONFIGURATION, THERAPEUTIC CONCRETION

When Paul Celan says that the poem leads all metaphors and tropes *ad absurdum*, he points to a significant breach in the world-prose of a unified *ratio* and its own instrumental (and totalizing) emplacement. Metaphors and tropes are part of the symbolic construction of the world. In Western culture, such instances of representation are at the same time a promise of restitution (after the separation of word and thing) and an irrevocable loss of presence (since the thing remains external to language). Can a poem show the world in its immediate presence? Celan draws a line and, along that line, displays a proliferation of fragments in an attempt to concoct *a voice* that might restitute a resonating presence. But the voice is that of the other side[49], the dark thread in the still darker pattern, the abyss from which the status of a 'Thou' can never result. His labyrinth, mindful of the Cretan one, is configured by a thread (the meridian) connecting fading-out poles (homeland and promised land) and delineating a trajectory that, after many detours, inevitably leads to the center (abyss, suicide)[50]. Breton and Lawrence introduce the figure of the *'primitive' other*, an alternative path to the dead end of conjuring an immediate presence from the gap of a civilizational underworld. They don't follow a thread, but branch out possibilities (art detached from religion, instinct correcting consciousness, alignment of Western utopias and indigenism, etc.) to do justice to that alterity, but come back to their starting point: the ethnocentric world-disclosure that declares itself universal and taints the alternative space. Their labyrinth is the so-called *Irrweg*. Precisely upon the traces of their failure, the following question arises: are all tree branches of that labyrinth blind alleys? The answer is negative. If all the branches of the *Irrweg* were unrolled, one of them would not lead astray but to the center[51]. But in that alley, death appears as the place of ultimate alchemical transformation: a world re-configured from the space of the other. That was Artaud's *poietic* attempt to attain an individual and collective *apokatastasis* under the guidance of the Tarahumaras.

French anthropologist Francis Affergan speaks about a common purpose of poetry and ethnology "to show the worlds in their own presence"[52]. This statement may surprise the reader. What does an art like poetry with its supposedly subjective, emotional, and fantasy-laden universe have to do with ethnology, a knowledge discipline in which objectivity, rational description and analytic thinking are said to have absolute primacy? The framework of Affergan's reflection is "the collapse of the symbolic system"[53], a system that "consists entirely of representations"[54], thus unfolding the world in a logic of (prescriptive) duplicity and (failed) correspondence. In the form of metaphors or images (including those of modern

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48 Antonin Artaud: *Ibidem*, p. 28.

49 In Celan's poetry this voice is that of the victims of the Shoah. This is a strong indication of the essential link between poetry and the collapse of representation. The voice of the poet can never speak *for* the dead, and the alternative intelligibility of the poem cannot reached the point of fusion with the absent voice to render it audible. Celan's poetry can never be a poetry of *cruelty* (in Artaud's sense of the word), since the weight of history is in his case heavier than the gate to any mystery.

50 For a summary of the main characteristics of the Cretan labyrinth (structure of the labyrinth revealing – if unrolled – one single thread, a one-way path with multiple detours leading inevitably to the center, etc.), cf. Umberto Eco: *Dall'albero al labirinto: studi storici sul segno e l'interpretazione*, Milano 2017, p. 71.

51 Cf. Umberto Eco's description of this labyrinth (which he calls "manieristic"): "If it were unrolled, it would take the form of a tree, a structure of blind alleys (with exception of one)" (Umberto Eco, *Ibidem*, pp. 72-73).

52 Francis Affergan: *Anthropologie et poésie. L'effondrement du symbolique*, Paris 2020, p. 7.

53 Francis Affergan: *Ibidem*, p. 11.

54 Francis Affergan: *Ibidem*, p. 13.

science and its etiological explanation of the world), the Western regime of representation intended to constitute an objective (or re-presented) world, that is, a world in which meaning as an open system of values susceptible of being reconsidered and modified becomes self-contained – stable, consistent, convincing enough – at the price of being saturated by semantic constraints of signification[55]. Poetry and ethnology point to the fact that the world exceeds the symbolic constraints and that which escapes the symbolic network is not pathological or unintelligible but, rather, a challenge to an established form of intelligibility. In other words: the infinite semiosis required to preserve meaning (as the creative dimension of human life) and minimize reified signification can never be contained – or rather locked up – in *one* single culture that declares it possesses universal values.

Umberto Eco articulates the conflict between signification and meaning with another opposition internal to the history of Western literacy and scholarship: the dictionary and the encyclopedia as intelligibility models. In their pure forms, the dictionary contains "only those properties which are necessary and sufficient to distinguish the concept being defined from any other", whereas the encyclopedia extends "the knowledge of a language" contained in the analytical definition of terms to "a certain knowledge of the world"[56]. A language open to the world is no longer stable, self-contained, and well-delimited. The signification of dogs analytically articulated in terms of 'animals' and 'mammals' differs from an encyclopedic approach including physical properties like 'barking' and 'growling', as well as psychological and even mythological properties like 'emphatic capacity', 'symbol of transgression (in Greek philosophy)' or 'guardians of the underworld (in Norse, Welsh, and Egyptian mythology)'. For Umberto Eco, the tree-branch logic of the dictionary is transgressed in the encyclopedia, since the latter's opening to infinite semiosis (including the factual, the possible, the fantastic, the supernatural, etc.) introduces another type of *logos*, closer to mystery than to logic: "the encyclopedia presents itself rather as a map of different territories with jagged and imprecise borders. This gives the impression of moving through it as if *walking in a labyrinth*"[57]. The mystery of the labyrinth is an open gate to alterity, and crossing that gate is a significant task of *trans*cultural implications today.

For Francis Affergan, both poetry and ethnology pick up the challenge of alterity with full consciousness of the situation with which Western culture is confronted in the XXI century: the collapse of its own – hegemonic and ethnocentric – world-configuration. That is the reason why poetry does not appear as an art belonging to the sphere of subjectivity and emotions as opposed to ethnology as a science seeking objectivity and facts. Poetry appears on the contrary as an effort to work on the differential interstices emerging from the ruins of a unified world-reference and achieve the external side of the inherited (and conditioned) symbolism. In this sense, it is no surprise that Affergan deals with figures like Rimbaud, Valéry, Mallarmé and Celan, for it is in those authors that the significance of *Poiesis* as an access to the labyrinth of meaning and alterity becomes ostensible. As to ethnography, it could be seen as the art of dealing with the "abyssal chasm [*gouffre abyssal*]"[58] separating exotic societies from

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55 For the distinction between meaning [*sens*] and signification [*signification*], see Affergan, *Ibidem*, p. 26. My reference to epistemic thinking may seem contradictory, since Affergan relates the "malady of language" with a procedure that goes in the opposite direction: adaptation of lexical and semantic resources to an ideological hierarchy (for example the world 'reactionary' applied to anyone that does not follow what is prescribed as 'progress') and proliferation of fake synonyms (as in the chain 'criminal', 'marginal', 'foreigner'). Epistemic thinking should correct those pathological deviations of language. However, in his critique of symbolic thinking, Affergan poses the question of 'alterity', which goes much deeper than an observation on ideological or political misuses of language *within* the Western culture. The question of alterity is related not only with the way in which we perceive the other, but also with the possible way to avoid introjection mechanisms that pre-define the other within our own (reified) system of values to the detriment of the quality or the intensity of the encounter as 'discovery'. In this respect cf. also Francis Affergan: *Exotisme et alterité*, Paris 1987, p. 9.

56 Umberto Eco: *Dall'alberto al labirinto*, p. 15.

57 Umberto Eco: *Ibidem*, p. 42. My translation and my emphasis.

58 Francis Affergan: *Anthropologie et poésie*, p. 96.

our own. The chasm becomes an abyss at the moment when the anthropologist realizes that doing justice to those modes of being implies a critical scrutiny of taken-for-granted convictions, even that of the "universal question of human knowledge"[59]. This means, among other things, re-thinking (and maybe re-visioning) relations, for they are the constitutive factor in the process of world-configuration. It is in the transcultural assemblage of relations that we can see the invalidity of automatically applying hegemonic schemes anchored in the particularity of a hegemonic culture. "The presence", writes Affergan, "is always pierced by a crisis whose function is to put that presence in danger"[60]. It is easier to repress (or to oppress) what we cannot grasp than to put ourselves at the risk of coming to terms with it by taking intellectual, existential, and cultural detours. In this sense, an ethnology conscious of the present situation and willing to face the challenge of alterity should come closer to poetry, and poetry should work on the interstices of different world-configurations to rescue a glimmer of that alterity piercing (and dramatically re-configuring) any instance of *self*-presence. Ethnology and poetry should nurture the *poietic* significance of the passage from the encyclopedia of classical humanism and its expanding universe to the labyrinth of transcultural challenges with all its ontological twists and turns. This passage would be, among other things, a therapeutic concretion within a compulsory civilizational turning point.

Poetry and ethnology point to the fact that the world exceeds the symbolic constraints and that which escapes the symbolic network is not pathological or unintelligible but, rather, a challenge to an established form of intelligibility.

HOLDING THE THREAD OF THE TWISTED PATH

It is not enough to speak of the labyrinth as a complex network of passages, a place where one can get lost, an architectural puzzle, or a maze. The trajectory of the labyrinth is demarcated by an entrance and a center. Due to their symbolic pregnancy, they are not 'fixed' as is usually thought, since the entrance is also the exit, the center is already in each one of the passages, and they can adopt a surprising variety of shapes: natural arrangements, majestic buildings, stone carvings, coin stamps, animal or human bowels, other-than-human moods, and cosmic designs. Such dynamic demarcation and shape-shifting qualities makes the figure both self-contained and open-ended. Already in its unicursal variant, the single path is curved and coiled out of recognition, complexified and turned into a pattern, but it is still a thread[61] we can hold to retrace our steps and regain orientation. The explorer of the labyrinth has always a direction, even if the scope of the movement may not be clear. With each step, something is fulfilled that goes beyond the immediate uncertainty, as if the explorer were the living trace, the organic and conscious realization of a much bigger planimetric configuration. Within a labyrinth, there are basically two ways of getting lost. The most common is when one focuses excessively on the individual dimension of the exploration and disconnects oneself from one's own concrete embeddedness. Its diametrical opposite is also an aberration: to focus exclusively on the center to the point of not being able to perceive one's own steps and the multiplicity of the paths. Taken as cultural traits, both extremes are solidary forms of isolation nurtured by

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59 Francis Affergan: *Ibidem*, p. 97. It must be said, however, that Affergan does not give up his attachment to "the universal" as a regulative idea in anthropology. Quite on the contrary, he severely criticizes the critical relativism that seeks other articulations of discourse to render alterity perceptible: "The hatred of ethnocentrism, anthropomorphism, essentialism and identity leads to delirious elaborations based on imaginary variations or counter-factual hypotheses that could never attain the slightest degree of validation or invalidation stemming from the reality of the world" (Francis Affergan: *Ibidem*, p. 104, my translation).

60 Francis Affergan: *Ibidem*, p. 112.

61 For the coincidence between the single path and Ariadne's thread in the unicursal labyrinth, cf. Umberto Eco, *Dall'albero al labirinto*, p. 71.

the same will-to-dominance. The first one can be found in the philosophy of modernity with its insistence on an empirical and individually centered basis, producing a world of individualist monads disconnected from each other. The second is the model of classical metaphysics with its (potential or actual) denial of multiplicity for the sake of a transcendent unity[62] – the hegemony of which does not benefit anyone in the living world of human and non-human beings.

There is also an epochal inflexion point in the logic of the labyrinth, which is the rhizome. Considered by some authors as "the labyrinth of the contemporary times"[63], the rhizome has significant characteristics which differ from those of the labyrinth: there is no center in it, and no difference between outside and inside (hence no entrance or exit). The primacy of the line (as errant track) over the point (as orientation focus) erases the existential anchoring of the explorer as 'individual'. The contingent proliferation of unfolding and refolding layers, deviating and self-relocating lines, and half-twisted and non-orientable surfaces renders the idea of a 'self-contained whole' literally impossible. The rhizome is the utmost realization of the labyrinth as 'maze', the transformation of a structure (however dynamic) into an assemblage, a mutation out of shape of the labyrinth topography, in which its *poietic* significance becomes non-territorial expenditure[64].

Non-territoriality is no substantial aspect of the rhizome – since there is nothing substantial in that radical figure of becoming and heterogeneity. It is rather the moment in which the flux of released, enhanced, or subverted desire breaks out of the coding system and becomes able to re-shape the territory from an alternative though only virtually retrievable framework. Is such re-shaping and re-territorialization qualitatively different from all other forms of configuring a territory? Society consists, without any exception, in a permanent coding of fluxes[65]. The relevant question is: which modality should be implemented and what would its implications be for human subjects and their set of human and non-human relations? What I termed 'auto-poietic expenditure' contained in the figure of the rhizome rejects any coding system that aims at a self-contained whole, however plural and dynamic, however hostile it may be in the face of quantification and mechanization. The coding strategies of so-called 'archaic societies' (masks, rituals, taboos, etc.) are, from the perspective of the rhizome, collectively efficient but ultimately oppressive in their ways of channeling desire[66]. In the same way,

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62 It goes without saying that there are metaphysical models in which the multiplicity is integrated, which come close to the figure of the labyrinth: the transcendent instance of the Tantric mandala (for example the *bindu* in the case of the *śrīcakra*, with its cosmic unfolding of energy rotations) is not the same type of transcendence as the discontinuous *brahman* of Advaita Vedānta; the emanation of the *Nous* in Neo-Platonic philosophy is not the same as the dichotomic primacy of the intelligible [*noetón*] over the sensible [*aisthetón*] in Plato's philosophy. However, the asymmetric focus on transcendence, in whichever form it is postulated, confiscates the energy and power residing in the richness of diversity in a *non*-place beyond human reach. In the best cases this is a sort of anti-cathexis that might serve as consolation in the face of death; in the worst cases it turns out to be the exercise of political power in the name of the ineffable, the unsurpassable, or the almighty.

63 Malek Abbou: *Les Labyrinthes*, Préface égaré, pp. 43-44.

64 The term 'expenditure' in the sense given to it by Georges Bataille may be functional to my reasoning, since it is related to a reversal (of accumulation and arrangement), a transgression (against established limits), and a dissipation (in the face of calculated restraint). Cf. Georges Bataille: *La part maudite*, in: *Œuvres completes VII*, Paris 1976, pp. 17-280, especially pp. 15-16, and pp. 197-204. The addition of the adjective 'non-territorial' is related to Félix Guattari's notion of 'machinic autopoiesis', which opposes a pluri-dimensional flux of non-signifying intensities to the self-contained notion of (extensively determined) structure for the characterization of relations (cf. Félix Guattari: *Chaosmose*, Paris 2022, p. 70). This non-territoriality of the autopoiesis is solidary with the notion of 'intensive language', which defies the primacy of paradigmatic invariants to be realized in syntagmatic associations before an virtual overflow of "transformation and creation lines" (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Mille Plateaux*, Paris 1980, p. 125) preceding any division between 'potentiality' and 'actuality'.

65 Cf. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *L'Anti-Œdipe*, Paris 1973, p. 170.

66 The following passage of *L'Anti-Œdipe* shows quite clearly the rhizomatic rejection of everything that links preservation of quality and sacredness: "The primitive, savage unity of desire and production is the earth, for the earth is not only the multiple and divided object of labor; it is also the unique and indivisible entity, the full body folded back on the productive forces to appropriate them as a presupposed natural or divine instance" (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe*, p, 168). Under the influence of the remarkable ethnological work of

the adherence of certain individuals to a lineage or a tradition is regarded as a submission of subjective freedom to a vertical (and therefore tyrannic) authority[67]. Capitalism, not only as a specific mode of production but also as a model for the functioning of society, appears as the substitution of vertically coded fluxes by a horizontal display of abstract quantities: there is no authority, no synthesis, no self-contained logic, no qualities rooted in blood, race, land, or even culture of origin – since there is ultimately no retrievable origin. Abstract qualities lead to collective alienation, whereas machinic fluxes (born from the former) embody a qualitative turn toward a construction of singularities. Paradoxically enough, both sets are reciprocally intertwined like a Möbius strip.

The rhizome's ambiguous power of world-(re-)configuration is dramatically exemplified in the situation of Indigenous – that is, non-modern and non-capitalist – cultures today[68], cultures which on the one hand resist the destructive power of a globalized multifunctional network, and on the other hand cannot avoid being sucked up into the latter's vortex of semiotic reproduction. Nowadays, there is an undeniable *global* circulation of Indigenous cultures (through spiritual tourism, social media, and virtual networks), the main struggle of which is carried out in the name of *local* pockets of resistance (all of them rooted in pre-modern or anti-modern modes of existence). Any revivification of local languages, traditions, histories, or community concerns is inevitably re-appropriated by a global-capitalist logic not only alien but also hostile to the original geopolitical aims of those populations[69]. Are Indigenous cultures to be exclusively understood as part of the rhizomatic transformation of the labyrinth?

The fact that these cultures have been absorbed in the infinite proliferation of global semiosis – with its broad spectrum from profit-oriented exploitation of Indigenous art and customs to shamanic-based spiritual wellness courses – does not mean that the *poietic* significance must necessarily be articulated within the immanence of that logic. Micropolitical torsions or (trans-)cultural re-valuations of alterity are not compelled to adopt what the mainstream discourse of the post-modern West – from cross-border management to university debates – usually presents as the only option holding many alternatives within it: the questionable association of globalized economy, increasing undifferentiation of cultural specificities, and democratic progress. Is there any thread in those 'alternatives' that can be held to gain orientation? If rescuing local values susceptible of introducing an alternative world-configuration is one of the infinite reterritorialization options within the rhizome, that goal can also be achieved through the attempt at qualitative delimitation, an unexpected retracing of steps which reintroduces the figure of the labyrinth. Without that retroaction, the *poietic* significance of human thoughts and actions gets lost in the proliferation of saturated signification – to the detriment of its differential meaning.

Barbara Glowczewski on Aboriginal Australians and the progressive contact with Brazilian intellectuals, especially through the aid of Suely Rolnik, Félix Guattari modified that point of view toward the end of the 1980s. The starting point of the dialogue between Barbara Glowczewski and Félix Guattari is documented in the first issue of the review *Chimères* (1987), although the dialogue took place between 1983 and 1985. His first trip to Brazil took place in 1982 (cf. François Dosse: *Gilles Deleuze Félix Guattari: Biographie croisée*, Paris 2009, pp. 574-577).

67 Cf. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Ibidem.*

68 I use the term 'Indigenous', which in the European context is exclusively associated with the Indigenous populations of North and South America, in a broader sense that includes also autochthonous cultures in Africa, South Asia and Australia. All these cultural groups share important features that, even before any explicit political action on their part, embody a considerable dissidence with regard to the dominant world view based on Western (hyper-)modernity: historical continuity with a pre-colonial past; non-modern social and political organizations; distinct languages, customs and beliefs; determination to preserve their ancestral values against globalized Westernization, and resolute affirmation of the "conflict-laden difference" they incarnate.

69 Valuable reflections on the tension between the global and the local as well as on the fetishization of aboriginal life and the neo-colonialism of university scholars can be found in Faye Ginsburg, Resources of Hope: Learning from the Local in a Transnational Era, in: Claire Smith & Graeme K. Ward (eds.): *Indigenous Cultures in an Interconnected World*, London: New York 2020, pp. 27-48.

Alain Daniélou was no poet, but one could say that he lived as one. What difference does that make? He sensed the hidden place from which a *poietic* significance can emerge in a (Westernized) world of conflicts and social disintegration. In the light of history, many limitations become visible in his life and work, but this is no particularity, since the dynamics of history reveals such limitations in every – individual or collective – human endeavor. Poetry, instead, cuts across such deficiencies and illuminates portions of embodied destiny. There are people who call themselves 'poets' because they write or sing about their feelings. Such narcissistic turmoil is as ridiculous as the attitude of unemotional rationalists who write against poets in the name of 'science', as if epistemic rigor could ever correct – or cure – literary flights of fancy. There is a curious mixture of the two former cases: scholars (I take old school philologists for the occasion, following Nietzsche's traces) who produce, in what for colleagues would be "a fit of madness", an psychologically interesting parody of Goethe's *Gelegenheitsgedichte*[70]. The motivation is, without exception, the irruption of 'the erotic polarity' in their lives. They feel abandoned to their own fate. Their old manuscripts, scrolls, papyri, and critical editions no longer have any apotropaic function. They end up wielding their pen (in an unparalleled masturbatory urge) and writing for the 'beloved *object of desire*', not only *a* poem, but mostly *a legion* of poems. Could that be an unconscious attempt to scare the lover away, or an exhibition of their own frailty to retain – and thus absorb – the living presence of somebody that turns out to be *insistently much more than an object*? Most surely both. But there is no *poietic* significance in the interstice between them, because nothing changes with that gesture. If the lover (usually a woman, since I am talking about patriarchs) persists and *penetrates* their lives, a transformation may ensue. They could open themselves to the mystery of *a kind of* alterity (the transfigured Minotaur in the shape of a virgin goddess?)[71] and catch a glimpse of an unknown cartography. It is precisely there that the paths to knowledge deviate from the symbolic barricade of their positivist textures and are battered and turned upside down by erotic bodies, sexual fluids, and the spine-chilling passage from anxiety (or neurotic compulsion) to dread (or soul abduction)[72]. In such cases, the *poietic* significance flittingly pierces the veil of textual mediation and printed obsessions, and life shines forth.

In what sense did Alain Daniélou live as a poet? The labyrinth was for him not only the symbolic representation and ritual realization of an experience[73], but also a concrete place. Even more: a refuge, a source, a destination. He lived in a labyrinth that he himself created,

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70 In a letter to Johan Peter Eckermann dated 18 September 1823, Goethe says that any occasion becomes a special case if the poet deals with it (which leads to the conclusion that *all* poems are poems for occasions [*Gelegenheitsgedichte*], cf. *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens 1823-1832,* ed. by Regine Otto, München 1984, p. 39). In the case of philologists, the reflection of the feminine in their anima renders the occasion poetic. In other words: they are the ones being dealt with, and poetry is not in their hands, so ultimately *none* of their poems is a poem for occasions.

71 "The motif of the woman or goddess in the labyrinth is one of the great labyrinthine myths. Like the Minotaur legend, it involves the labyrinth as a place of capture and defence. [...] The woman in the labyrinth motif can be divided into two types of legend: one tells of the woman who is abducted and imprisoned in the labyrinth, who has to be liberated, whilst the other involves a young woman who has to be reached by the young man" (Nigel Pennick: *Mazes and Labyrinths*, London 1990, pp. 38-39). In the second type of legend, the woman is not the prey, but the 'monster' at the center of the labyrinth. This points to a much deeper issue than an anxiety complex of men. For Erich Neumann it points to the elementary character of the Feminine (as archetype affecting both women and men). In the consideration of that aspect, goddesses like Artemis and Cybele come closer to the Minotaur, since on that level "there seems to be no difference between male and female gods. Both can assume animal form" (Erich Neumann: *Die grosse Mutter. Eine Phänomenologie der weiblichen Gestaltungen des Unbewussten*, Olten: Freiburg 1988, p. 258).

72 For the essential relationship between the figure of the labyrinth and the twisted path of knowledge, including remarks on the sexual character of its realization, cf. Alain Daniélou: *Shiva et Dionysos*, Paris 1979, pp. 115-116.

73 Cf. Alain Daniélou: *Shiva et Dionysos*, p. 153.

the elements of which revolved around erotic rapture, ecstatic cults, *daimonic* inspiration, sacralized Nature, ambivalent creation, and subjective exploration[74]. But that labyrinth was at the same time given to him – as existential framework, life-long learning process, and auspicious place in a land of exile[75]. Can anybody create what is given to him? This can only occur when each step in the process is taken with full affirmation of a mysterious itinerary – as if one were following traces left on one's path. Such traces are not visible until one's own steps imprint their own traces, by means of which an ordained co-incidence is unconcealed. The environment resonates with the steps and guides them, a living field of forces layered through different subjective instances, totally inaccessible to the modern eye, progressively repressed by the industrial and financial hubris of the last centuries. It is in those instances that alterity opens itself to encounters in which totalizing schemes of domination (from slavery to genocide) have no place, for they deny the constitutive character of the non-objectifiable multiplicity that composes a world on a pre-instrumental level of relation. In that world, fiction is reality, gods appear as concrete beings, and time becomes achronic or dislocated.

The 'animistic setting' alluded to above has been repressed throughout history, firstly with monotheism and its evacuation of the sacred from the sphere of natural forces for the sake of a higher transcendent instance, and secondly with secularism and its elimination of every transcendent meaning in the name of an ego-centered and atomized will to self-determination. It didn't take long for the crisis to show concrete signs: monotheism turned into an abstract doctrine devoid of transformative power or sought a regressive and obscure form of renovation in religious fanaticism. Secularism, for its part, gave way to atomization, skepticism and increasing disorientation, the corollary of which is contemporary nihilism. With the rise of new technologies and virtual reality, a new sensitivity for interconnectedness and relation have become prominent, but not precisely as a retrieval of existential singularity against quantified abstraction. Rather the contrary: in the global appropriation of local cultures, Indigenous world-configurations are cunningly instrumentalized to justify not only their atomization and distorted re-composition in the successful amalgam of the exotic and the spiritual[76], but also their alienating parody under the heading 'techno-animism'[77]. Any other attempt at internal

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74 In order to dispel a widely repeated commonplace of post-modern criticism (which as a whole does not consist only of commonplaces), I must point to the fact that Daniélou did not conceive Nature as a self-sufficient homeostatic balance preceding the irruption of human culture, but as a complex field of living forces with an intelligence of their own, with which human beings are permanently intertwined (whether they are aware of it or not). In this sense, what is called 'culture' in the modern sense of the term would not be an elevation of the spirit over a former stage of idealistic simplicity, but rather a reduction, or an impoverishment of the multilayered and pluri-subjective energetic field of human and non-human socialization so richly codified in traditional cultures in India, Africa or Pre-Columbian America.

75 I call 'existential framework' Daniélou's animistic sensitivity for other-than-human agency in Nature, something which began early in his childhood with the installation of a shrine on his parents' property in Brittany. The 'life-long learning' process refers to his life in India, where he was re-educated in a traditional setting with quite different values from the ones in the modern West. The 'auspicious place in a land of exile' was found in his mature years and turned out to be a qualitative step toward a practical philosophy of integration. On his return to Europe (after spending more than twenty years in India), Daniélou's coordinates of self and otherness were significantly displaced: "Europe was for me a land of exile [...] What I had known of it seemed to me a former life perceived in a dream" (Alain Daniélou: *Le Chemin du Labyrinthe. Souvenirs d'Orient et d'Occident*, Lausanne 2015, p. 217). But an elaborated displacement can also be an accomplishment. In that period of exile, he found in the Italic peninsula a place "where the energies of heaven and earth meet and one can feel the presence of the gods [...] the hill of the Labyrinth" (Alain Daniélou: *Ibidem*, p. 226, my translation).

76 This is the inevitable destiny of local cultures exposed to global interconnectedness, and it is true that not everything in such transformations is detrimental. However, the general direction of such appropriations, from a shamanism adapted to the caprices of white middle-class Europeans to spiritual mass tourism encompassing forest medicines like Ayahuasca or Iboga, are not so promising – not because they consciously ignore, betray or transgress the framework, contents and methods of traditional settings, but mainly because the sense of the appropriation is to reproduce capitalist commodification processes without any retroactive transformation of their most alienating aspects.

77 The ignorance of the complex link between anthropization and entropy, especially regarding the

delimitation of the commodified 'rhizomatic flux' is considered the result of an imaginary projection of primitivity in an inexistent 'outside', and thus disqualified as such.

In the light of the rhizomatic turn, Daniélou's defense of traditional societies and their protectionist bent, his insistence on a socio-cosmic and even magico-religious amplification of intellectual research, and his tendency to equate the value of science and mythology, fact and fiction, eroticism and mysticism, appear outmoded – to say the least. Traditions change permanently and maintain no intrinsic consistency beyond that dynamic; magic and religion are powerful narratives but, strictly speaking, not intellectual research; and the sole meaningful convergence of eroticism and mysticism can only be vertical (either a primacy of eroticism over mysticism, as in psychoanalysis, or a theological neutralization of the erotic as the lowest stratum of spiritual awakening). Even post-modern anthropologists who defy neo-colonial standards of research do not generally venture into the reverse-side in the way that Artaud declared so important in order to grasp the living and challenging presence of the other(s)[78]. What would happen if that *poietic* criterion of transformation – both of experience and discourse – were fulfilled?

The main aspect of Daniélou's work lies in the alchemy he exercised on his own *corpus*, the passage from the textual and speculative (in his writings) to the local and embodied (in the place where he lived). The Labyrinth[79] is the concretion of his own philosophy of life, and the realization of his Shaivite-Dionysian project. It is a delimitation of an animistic space open to the presence and influence of non-human agency, where human beings are de-centered, Nature is perceived in its full ambiguity and power, and each corner of the land harbors some mysterious aspect defying rational control. Some of these 'local' aspects are contained in the short stories he wrote toward the end of his life, *Les contes du labyrinthe* (1991); they concentrate the lived configuration he left behind as the differential trace and token of his way of dealing with alterity.

The Italian hillside at Zagarolo, called *Colle Labirinto*, can be seen as a retroactive folding in the rhizome where the figure of the labyrinth appears once again as a regained *poietic* space at the interstices of a naturalized and all-encompassing global narrative. Daniélou's Labyrinth is not more and not less than a model – one of many, the articulation of which opens new directions and shows other lines along which humans could re-configure a world. Local traditions have a value independently of every appropriation that might take place on a global scale; intellectual history is not only made by Western scholars but also by non-Western teachers, masters and thinkers, in another style and with another vocabulary; any instance of forward-looking thinking that rejects the past and judges cultural alterity according to selective standards of (Western) progress is a contribution to cultural regression. The 'salvation' of Europe – and the West – is not in the business of war, but in the art – and the effort – of learning. •

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destiny of human's 'exosomatization' i.e. the implementation of inorganic objects in their social structure and organization to enhance cultural and especially economic production (cf. Bernard Stiegler (ed.): *Bifurquer*, Paris 2020, p. 75) inevitably leads to an amalgamation of instances of alienation' with patterns of relation. Max Weber's pronouncement of a 'disenchantment of the world' contributes to clear this matter. The expression – repeated *ad nauseam* – does not mean that the animistic, spiritual, magical, or religious powers that rendered past societies cohesive and meaningful have been banished from the cultural arena. It points rather to the mainstream tendency to subordinate them under the abstract principles of capitalist reproduction. The superimposition of abstract principles and processes on the sphere of living interactions and its subsequent naturalization cannot be called a new modality of relation. Despite its effectiveness in the sphere of economic production and distribution, it is mainly a device of fragmentation and isolation of living organisms from all possible forms of dignified sociality. Alienated relations are still relations, but they go in the opposite direction from that of a cohesive community and the preservation of meaning through creative interactions and inner fulfillment.

78 But some of them do, and they are a model for change. Edith Turner, Bruce Albert, and Paul Stoller are examples of the humanist spirit engaged in the perception of the other side with a robust elaboration of its consequences.

79 The proper name refers to Alain Daniélou's Labyrinth, the place he chose to live in the last part of his life (cf. *supra*, note 75).



ANIMISM AND PAGANISM TWO SIDES OF THE SAME "TURN"?

INTERVIEW WITH GRAHAM HARVEY

by Adrián Navigante

Graham Harvey is Professor of Religious Studies at the Open University of the UK and ecological activist engaged in various initiatives to face the global crisis of the XXI century. His research and practice of different forms of contemporary European paganism makes him a rather heterodox scholar questioning ethnocentric views of appropriation, circulation, and transmission of knowledge. Graham Harvey's work combines scholarship with other – more performative – styles of writing to counterbalance world-wide ecocide, the destruction of local traditions in non-Western cultures, reactionary politics of identity, and religious fundamentalism.

The following interview, a lengthy dialogue subsequent to the 2023 transcultural interaction with Graham Harvey in Italy entitled "Animism and Paganism: A Transversal Approach", focuses on three of his most significant books: Contemporary Paganism *(1997),* Food, Sex & Strangers *(2013), and* Animism: Respecting the Living World *(revised and updated edition 2017). The 2023 interaction was organized by the Interstices Team at the Alain Daniélou Foundation. As a complementary text,* Transversal Paths *reproduces Graham Harvey's* Animist Manifesto *(2012), a text widely circulating on the net, which has been translated into various languages over the last twelve years.*

I - CONTEMPORARY PAGANISM

Adrián Navigante: I would like to start with a comment on your book *Contemporary Paganism*, published in 1997 and reedited in 2011. Last century some authors claiming strong bounds with Nature announced different versions of a "return to Paganism"; your book shows that this "return" has already taken place, beyond legitimation strategies, through a renewal that flourishes in diverse non-hierarchical and non-dogmatic religious movements related to Nature and the Earth. Upon closer look, Paganism does not seem to you a heritage of the past at all, but a reality of the present. It is interesting that you don't use the concept "*neo*-paganism", unlike other authors, for example Michael York. You define Paganism as a religion of the present without thematically resorting to "ancient Paganism", whose different expressions in pre-Christian times still seem important in contemporary Pagans' legitimation claims. Does your disregard of that imaginary claim of continuity between ancient and contemporary go hand in hand with a conviction that there are viable modern versions of Paganism (in the British Isles and eventually in Western Europe), or do you think that contemporary Paganism is supported and legitimated by its own elaborated ritual structure, its creative self-narrative, and its strong link with significant issues of the present – such as ecology and female empowerment?

Graham Harvey: Thanks, this is a fine comment and question to start with! You return me to a book that signaled a change of interests after my PhD. And you provoke me to think again about the themes of "returning", antiquity and modernity, legitimation, and creativity. I suspect that much of our conversation will circulate around those themes.

Sometimes the accidents (fortuitous or regrettable) of encounters and experiences shape a researcher's understanding and trajectory. The first Pagans I got to know well were in the UK and were anarchic and focused on infusing contemporary popular culture with what might be called "the celebration of Nature". We'll come back to "Nature" later, I'm sure! The term "neo-Pagan" – with or without a hyphen – wasn't one I heard much until I encountered more North American groups, books, and discussions. But, more importantly, those first Pagans I got to know didn't make claims to have inherited or continued an ancient tradition. Or, when they did so, it was hardly serious. For example, one Druid began some rituals by reading a script with the words "Our tradition is an ancient, honorable and oral tradition" – which always involved quickly putting the script behind his back. Orality was restored along with some self-parody. But the antiquity of this version of Druidry was never seriously asserted. Certainly, eighteenth and nineteenth century heroes like William Blake, Iolo Morganwg, and William Price were venerated, but so too were Wally Hope, who founded Stonehenge People's Free Festival in 1972, and a host of contemporary rock, punk, and folk musicians. This was a self-consciously Paganism for this age and for present-day generations.

Pagans seem more relaxed now about asserting polytheistic and animist ideas and practices without treating these as only metaphorical or psychological.

Happily, other scholars have traced the real histories of the diverse branches of contemporary Paganisms. The work of Ronald Hutton is pre-eminent here – and is rightly valued by most Pagans. Indeed, Pagan engagement with Ronald's work has led to a re-assessment and setting-aside of most of those "origins stories" that did assert ancient lineages. Paradoxically, perhaps, this has allowed some trends to emerge that, perhaps, do make some aspects of Paganism more like older traditions. I think this is what you mean by "viable modern versions". Pagans

seem more relaxed now about asserting polytheistic and animist ideas and practices without treating these as only metaphorical or psychological. Some have also made interesting use of regional folklores and performances to create or reinvigorate rituals supportive of efforts to deal with the joys and dangers of the contemporary world.

There's an additional reason why I've never found the term "neo-Pagan" and claims to be "returning" to ancient tradition useful. And this is true of the term "New Religious Movement" that has been applied to many religious groups. It is that the idea of novelty rarely generates anything particularly interesting for either scholarly debate or practitioner involvement.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Paganism is a product of Modernity (a term I capitalize in the tradition of Bruno Latour, making the point that the term identifies a cultural, political, and economic project rather than merely a temporal phase). Although this Modernity of Paganism has led me to say some negative things to and about some Pagans, it is one foundation on which more ecological and more feminist and liberatory practices and lives can be built. Perhaps we'll come back to that.

In short, what interests me is the ways in which people live and perform their religions. And, yes, the rituals and rhetorics of Paganism work well as ways of enacting *and* contesting elements of the contemporary world. And they do so in ways that would not have worked well for previous generations.

Adrián Navigante: I would like to briefly recall and analyze the main definitions of Paganism you give in your book: 1. "A religion at home with the Earth" (Preface, p. xv)[1], 2. "What Pagans do and say" (Ibidem), 3. "A religion in which respectful relationships between humans and *all* others with whom we share life on Earth are significant" (Ibidem, p. 16), 4. "A polytheistic and/or animistic religion that celebrates life and living" (Chapter 1, p. 2), 5. "[A] diverse, pluralist, growing and living spirituality" (Chapter 1, p. 16). This is quite a varied spectrum, and certainly not at all simple to synthetize. From what one can read in these definitions, we are facing not only a pluralistic and diversified phenomenon, but also some paradoxes that, in my opinion, need some clarification. Paganism is an "earthly", an "embodied" religion (as opposed to a heavenly and spiritualized creed), but it can still be called "spiritual". Paganism acknowledges many gods but at the same time surpasses the polytheistic view by rendering *the whole spectrum of beings* as "souled": not only gods but animals, plants, and different natural phenomena (from mountains to rivers). The parameters of Paganism, judging from the groups operating in different parts of Europe and the world, are "regional" or "local", yet it gives the impression, as a planetary movement, of a "world-wide phenomenon" with an integrating force. You write that Paganism nurtures "freedom" and "tolerance", which are two values stemming from our urbanized liberal society – as opposed to the community-related, rural, or even wild-life aspects that are usually appended to it in contemporary discourse. Do these paradoxes involve a form of social tension, a lived contradiction, or a demanding challenge among Pagans today or are they fully indifferent to them?

Graham Harvey: I'm impressed and honored by your close reading! And you are right, I seem disposed not to systematize matters. That's a fault when it leads to a lack of clarity. Reading those definitions again now, I think I'd stick with the "Paganism is what Pagans do and say" and the one about diversity and plurality. I'd nuance the rather grander claims. That is, I've come to agree with some critiques within the Pagan community that I overplayed ecology and feminism. Again, I first met Pagans for whom these were formative. Initially I met fewer of the more esoteric and self-development focused Pagans. Nonetheless, I think that environmentalism and feminism (and other liberatory movements) have been increasingly formative

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1 Source indications in the first part of the interview refer to the second edition of Graham Harvey's book *Contemporary Paganism. Religions of the Earth from Druids and Witches to Heathens and Ecofeminists*, New York 2011. The first edition was published in 1997 under the title *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism*.

since then. And both polytheism and animism have become more explicit and evident among the many varieties of Paganism.

The more poetic assertion that Paganism is a "religion at home on Earth" is ok as an attention grabber. But it might support the accusation made by some of my scholarly peers that this is activism or even theology rather than a proper study of religion analysis. It needs nuancing, at least. But it works in the same way that a claim that Christianity is a "religion of salvation" might. That is, it highlights a theme given significant attention both as common-ground and boundary marker for adherents in all varieties of Christianity. The key words are used by many kinds of Pagan (or Christian) but not always in the same ways.

So, as you say, there are paradoxes within the plurality and diversity – not only of my presentation but also within Pagan self-representation and practice. This is most certainly not a systematized religion. Even those Pagans who write books and run workshops know that they are addressing a community resistant to systematization. And then there's the tension between local and global. This is a complex one. Sometimes it is only a matter of emphasis. Some celebrations are entirely focused on "this place", a particular ancient circle or woodland, a bioregion or watershed. But reports about these can be used deliberately to encourage others to locate themselves more firmly in other places. Similarly, a festival cycle originating in northwest Europe – with its four seasons and agricultural rhythms – *can* be adapted in totally different ecologies. I'm not convinced that these adaptations are always successful. In the many places which do not have four seasons, for instance, some of the possibilities of the cycle cannot be as productive as they might otherwise be.

Nonetheless, Pagans are creative and hardly ever sectarian about their still emerging tradition. I've often referred to a moment in one festival in which the ritual sharing of harvested foods was clearly taken to mean different things to different participants. For some, thanks were being given to grain producing plants. For others, the important harvest was that of having achieved ambitions "planted" in a spring festival. Some participants might have fused both emphases. Similarly, deities from different pantheons were named with no contest between radical polytheists, atheists, animists, or those for whom deities are psychological symbols or archetypes.

I'm not sure these tolerant traditions are only drawn from Modernity's liberalism. In some Pagan gatherings I have asserted that there's too much "Protestantism" among Pagans – e.g., an individualized and interiorized notion of selfhood. Nonetheless, there are plenty of examples of tolerant freedoms among Indigenous people. Ancestral traditions are often (but not always) exemplary and inspirational rather than legally binding. Visions are personal even if they require validation by elders and communities. I think it could be argued that Paganism is a meeting place in which thoroughly European Enlightenment inspirations meet indigenizing possibilities. That tension is, I think, exciting – or will be if Pagans contest Modernity more than some do right now!

Adrián Navigante: Let's go back to an aspect of the first question: Pagans always refer to a distant past that they intend to "reenact" in some way or another, whether they take that connection to be actual, symbolical, or indigenously minded[2]. Whether it is a lineage of witches from the time of the Inquisition, Iron-Age Druids, an ancient Goddess cult going back to the dawn of Europe or the Runic system of divination, such referents have the function of rendering contemporary attempts more solid, meaningful, and consistent. But there is more than mere legitimation. On the one hand, such efforts to get hold of a perennial source reveal a typically anti-modern attitude. The adepts' search for support in the past (tradition) appears as a critique of the meager possibilities offered by the present system of institutionalized religions

2 "The claim that Pagans are reviving ancient pre-Christian religious practices and cultures is less common than it once was but can still be encountered. [...] This is a small part of the possibility implied by the terms indigenous and indigenizing" (p. 231)

(including secular ones) to such attitudes and behaviors. On the other hand, contemporary Pagans seem to cope relatively well with modernity and its discontents, meaning the highly scientized and technocratic society in which we live. Do you see such gestures of past legitimation as a reaction to present circumstances, as a way of subverting mainstream dominant intellectual tendencies (in which such referents have no place whatsoever), or as something totally different from such assumptions?

Graham Harvey: I think that references to the past are more nuanced than they once were. This is partly because, as I've said, Ronald Hutton's work has been so well received – so the vast majority of Pagans have a better sense of actual histories. At the same time, Pagans are not only voracious consumers of scholarly work from many disciplines but have also been highly involved in the growth of academic Pagan Studies. So, the re-enactment aspects are now attuned to better scholarship than that which inspired the founders of key movements in the early to mid-twentieth century. At the same time, and for similar reasons, Pagans have become more confident about the relevance, value and successes of their ideas and practices today.

I'm intrigued that you see efforts to get hold of a perennial source "anti-modern". I think of it as typically Protestant! The assertion that a particular way of being Christian or doing Christianity is truer to the early Church or to the first followers of Jesus seems such a common refrain. Even the dislike of institutionalization fits firmly with Protestant rhetoric – especially in its nonconformist branches – with regular efforts to distinguish real Christianity from "Churchianity".

But all of this is mixed, somewhat uneasily, with elements of subversion. For one simple, and not too radical an example: it is somewhat surprising that Paganism is so much about ritual. Indeed, rituals are the common ground on which Pagans meet, the arena in which they recognize each other. This is odd because centuries of religious polemic and persecution has firmly fixed an association between ritual and willful ignorance or folly in British English. We identity "mere ritual" with "vain repetition", and contrast ritual with proper understanding and sincerely held beliefs (mind you, the media sometimes use "academic" to mean "irrelevant" or "meaningless" too.) And yet, Pagans make ritual their central practice. Not teaching or publishing – though books, magazines, blogs, and websites proliferate.

I'm not suggesting that Pagans are always brilliant ritualists. That would be remarkable given the prevailing anti-ritual legacy. They are often too individualistic (again, too Modern) to do ritual well. But here's the thing: when Pagans protest against destructive construction and consumption industries (e.g., road building and fossil fuel use), they do dramatic and colorful rituals as well as petitions and direct action. They demonstrate reverence for the larger-than-human world at the same time that they challenge the obscenities of Modernity.

I am increasingly convinced that Paganism is among the many movements world-wide that are trying to re-make what the Zapatistas call a "world in which many worlds are possible". This has led me to quote Arturo Escobar's words (in his *Pluriversal Politics*)[3] in a number of Pagan gatherings recently, knowing that they will be recognised and enthusiastically welcomed):

> "Those who still insist on the path of development and modernity are either suicidal, or at the least, ecocidal, and without question they are historical anachronisms. By contrast, those who defend place, territory, and the Earth are neither romantics nor 'infantile.' They represent the cutting edge of thought, for they are attuned to the Earth and to justice, and they understand the central issue of our historical moment: the transitions to other models for living, towards a pluriverse of worlds. ... [And quoting indigenous, peasant and Afrodescendant activists:] 'What's possible has already been done; now let's go for the impossible'" (pp.44-45).

Some Pagans get this and enact it more than others. But key themes among all kinds of Paganism are in tune with these ambitions, particularly meeting in acts of thanksgiving to the

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3 Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible*, translated by David Frye, Durham and London 2020. The original version of Escobar's book is called *Otro Posible es Posible: Caminando hacia las trancisiones desde Abya Yala/Afro/Latino-América* (Bogotá, 2018).

larger-than-human world.

Adrián Navigante: When you come to speak of the relationship between "Pagans", "Shamanism" and "New Age", your book adopts a clearly critical note (which you avoid in your description of different "Paganisms"). In Chapter 7, you use the term "*Neo*-shamanism" to refer to a nostalgic attitude which "[has] reduced shamanism to its lowest common denominator" (p. 106). When it comes to evaluating the link between Paganism and New Age, you don't seem to ascribe a positive value to what Pagans took from New Agers: an individualistic, psychologized, and universalistic approach in which the embodied human is stripped away and a return to pure spirit is preached (cf. p. 117). Do you think that the Gnostic (i.e., its inclination to an individualistic soteriology) bent of New Age and the European spiritualization of shamanism are in a way blocking an authentically subversive action, that is, ecologically minded attempts to de-objectify (i.e., "re-sacralize") Nature in the context of hyper-industrialism, massive deforestation, and biodiversity loss?

Graham Harvey: You are right: I've never managed to be as objective as some colleagues about New Age and neo-shamanism! Yes, there's a polemic here. One I caught from the people I liked when I first encountered Pagans. But also one that has become more entrenched when I have contemplated the evolution of religion in Modernity.

Briefly put, I see the processes that formed and developed the Peace of Westphalia (1648) as enforcing the individualization and interiorization of religion. The Westphalian settlement that defines Modernity's Nation States requires citizens to restrict transnational allegiances. So, any religious commitment that links someone to a foreign State is suspect and its public performance has become known as extremism. Religion, in this context, must be solely a matter of individual belief and kept separate from the requirements of politics and citizenship. Religion, in other words, has become a hobby.

The end result of that trajectory is "spirituality" as such matters are labelled. Protestantism led the way by asking people to believe rather than ritualize. Not that anyone actually stopped ritualizing – but that could never be celebrated. The extreme individuality of New Age and the extreme interiority of neo-shamanism (or core-shamanism) exemplify the further reach of this trajectory. It is evident in the contrast Davi Kopenawa Yanomami makes in his challenging assertion that "white people do not become shamans"[4]. They dream about themselves, and they do not practice the necessary purifications (diets and so on). There's a lot in this – and clearly Kopenawa wants "white people" to live differently.

More positively, I agree entirely with those who have said that New Age and neo-shamanism (with and beyond Paganism) are necessary therapies to aid people to live as individuals in Modernity with some degree of sanity. However, yes, I see them as blocks against the subversive actions that must, eventually, contest the prevailing dominant culture.

Adrián Navigante: In the chapter you devote to the question of "Magic", you refer to esoteric Kabbalah, the Golden Dawn and the left-hand magic(k) of Crowleans, as well as to Chaos and Eco-Magic. With exception of Eco Magic, we are confronted with a rich landscape of esoteric undercurrents in Western modernity whose values were not those of mainstream society. However, the esoteric currents or movements which contained Pagan elements or even preached their own return to Paganism did not ascribe any significant role to "Nature" – not at least with the semantic implications of today, which go from interconnectedness of beings and living systems to vegetal and animal intelligence. Aleister Crowley's "paganism" emanated from the imaginary construction of Egypt in XIX century esotericism; Kenneth Grant's chthonic inclination was related more to the demonology of grimoires and gothic arts than to an earth(ly) philosophy. How would you connect the (urban and mainly scripturally

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4 Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of A Yanomami Shaman*. Cambridge 2013, p. 375.

based) esoteric and occult traditions of magic with your notion of a nature-related and orally transmitted Paganism?

Graham Harvey: When I wrote that chapter, I knew less about esotericists and magicians than I ought to have done. I knew and still know less about them than I would if I were to re-write the chapter properly. However, I have learnt from some respected friends in that world that they read Crowley and others as celebrating the "natural world" and bodies. They say Crowley was both an esotericist and a Romantic.

Certainly, some the Pagan esotericists I have come to know (members of key groups and publishers of key texts) are enthusiastic participants in ecological and celebratory activities. The textual traditions that they value are among the inspirations for self-knowledges that are as thoroughly relational as the ethnographic texts that many self-identified animist Pagans value.

It is, perhaps, also worth noting that Gerald Gardner and Ross Nichols (founders of particular Pagan movements) fused esotericism with naturist and naturalist (i.e. nudist and ruralist) interests and practices. Indeed, I'm not entirely sure that "nature" is not itself an esoteric invention – certainly its Pagan inflection is entangled with Romanticism.

Adrián Navigante: There is a chapter in your book that particularly caught my attention: "Heathens". All the other chapters contain what may be called manifestations of Paganism (Celebrating the Seasons, Earth Mysteries) or related but clearly distinguishable concepts (Magic, Witchcraft, Shamanism), but when it comes to Heathenry, we seem to be located exactly within the same cosmological, historical, and anthropological complex as Paganism. You present Heathenry as a local variant of Paganism related to a specifically Germanic and Scandinavian ancestry, and you briefly mention a term which for me is one of the main reasons why the use of this term has become problematic, at least in German-speaking countries: *race.* The association between *heidnisch* and *völkisch*, between *Heidentum* and *Blut und Boden* ideology cannot be erased or even minimized in the German context, however fragmented (and in a way superficial) the Nazi use of Heathen traditions might have been – as you say referring to the instrumentalization of the Runes by Guido von List and Teutonic mythology (via Wagner). This problematic also points to the difficulty of make a homogeneous category out of Heathenry – since I don't think that in the English-speaking world Heathens carry the same "weight of history" upon their shoulders. In any case, I would like to know how the organized Heathen groups you researched stand with regard to this problematic – according to their linguistic and cultural provenance.

The extreme individuality of New Age and the extreme interiority of neo-shamanism (or core-shamanism) exemplify the further reach of Modernity on issues related to spirituality .

Graham Harvey: Identity politics has made the matter of "race" more difficult. On the one hand, Heathens and those who don't use that label but are attracted by Germanic, Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon traditions are completely aware of the problems. On the other hand, increasing claims to be "indigenous" by Europeans (in Europe or in Euro-settler-colonies) make decolonization and anti-colonialism more difficult. But these are recognized and debated matters.

I spent some time with organized Heathen groups – mostly English-speaking groups in Britain, but I also corresponded with representatives of groups in North America. Some of them were avowedly "racial" – a term that really doesn't mask their racism. They asserted, for instance, that each "race" has ancestral traditions to which people should affiliate. At one event, an individual displaying Nazi insignia and making Nazi salutes was escorted out of the building. But it was far from clear that anyone would have objected to him doing these things in less public contexts. Happily, I have spent more time at events hosted by groups which are welcoming of anyone, openly anti-racist and anti-fascist.

A range of other identity claims and practices made such groups similarly distinguishable. When I was told that "political correctness can go too far" I asked the leaders of one group where it begin in their movement. They laughed as they admitted (seemingly with pride) that they had no room for LGBT people or for women in leadership roles. Another group insisted that the Aesir and Vanir deities were not consistently heterosexual or patriarchal. They expressed dislike of the idea that a deity could only be encountered by or manifest in humans of the same ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age and so on.

Some of these conversations were more than uneasy – indeed, a threat of danger in some contexts made me reluctant to pursue them. The burden of responding to the "weight of history" has not diminished. But there are many Heathens who insist that a longer reach of history (i.e., beyond the invention of the category of "race") contains far more positive inspirations than negative ones.

II – FOOD, SEX AND STRANGERS

Adrián Navigante: Just as you define Paganism as "embodied religion" and "religion of the Earth", your view of religion in *Food, Sex and Strangers* (2013)[5] emphasizes the "materiality" of religious experiences and practices. Religion, your write in that book, is not about belief in God or about a transcendent sphere cut off from the senses, the imagination, and the practices of everyday life. It is on the contrary deeply embedded in a relational field of humans and other-than-humans where seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching are an essential part of that net of relations. Is this position a reaction against centuries of dominance by monotheistic creeds in the West, especially in the face of the ecological crisis we are going through? Is your *modus operandi* in any way guided by a will to "expand", or rather "democratize" the notion of religion by displacing it away from the dominant conceptual pair "theology-exegesis"?

Graham Harvey: Certainly, I'm committed to an approach to religion and religions that contrasts itself with theology. But I have become increasingly bored by efforts to challenge the dominance of what is called the "World Religions Paradigm". The paradigm presents religions as more-or-less like Protestant Christian theological systems. It generates books in which the founders and foundational texts of religions are definitive, and the actual lives of religious participants involves more-or-less understanding, commitment, and adherence to those structure. The problem faced in challenging this dominant narrative is that people want us to start with "basic facts" (five things Christians believe, eight things Jews do, four things Muslims agree on, eighteen main deities among Indigenous traditionalists). After that, you've lost. The foundations are wrong. We need to start elsewhere. And that elsewhere is a place in which Christians are also wrongly presented in the "World Religions Paradigm". Similarly, rejecting the Paradigm does not mean adding more religions to the list. Instead, it will require new textbooks to enable the study of even the religions in that elite club to begin and end with lived realities.

Obviously, I've just started my reply with the problem again! In *Food, Sex and Strangers* I wanted to start "elsewhere" – so I began with some exercises to help readers re-shape habits of learning and interacting. And then I use a range of ethnographic encounters to indicate some possible alternative ways in which "religion" might be considered and debated. All of these engage with the sensuality, relationality and performance of religion – i.e. the "doing" of religion in everyday as well as dramatic contexts.

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5 Source indications from this book refer to the Routledge edition of 2014: Graham Harvey, F*ood, Sex & Strangers. Understanding Religion as Everyday Life*, London and New York. The book was published for the first time in 2013 by Acumen.

Adrián Navigante: Apart from a perceptible critique of Christian (especially Protestant) theology, the idea of "religion" you develop in your book – to a great extent based on ethnological discourses on non-Western cultures – expresses a critical attitude toward the modern notion of individual selfhood and the secularized world left to us after the Enlightenment. It seems that, in your view, the process of modernity has progressively isolated humans from the much broader context of living beings in which they are embedded and has re-shaped nature according to a criterion of objectivation and quantification that has ended up eroding every "respectful form of relation" toward the living world. Do you see a continuity between the ideology of monotheisms (in which God is separated from nature and human beings re-defined in relation to the divine transcendence), and that of Enlightenment (in which the triumph of reason ended up placing the human on the level of the divine and getting rid even of that radical and almost unachievable transcendence)?

Graham Harvey: Yes, I have come to understand Modernity as a world-making project increasingly separating humans from the rest of the community. Indeed, I think it is a human separatist movement that inculcates a particular (and particularly bad) relationship with our other-than-human kin. That is, we are taught (in many ways) not to recognize others as kin but as objects. We end up as consumers of objects. That's the current form of Modernity's individual.

I don't think this is a necessary or obvious result of monotheism. Nor do I think there's a necessary continuity between monotheism and Modernity's project. Monotheists can contest human difference from others. It is possible to read the Hebrew Bible, for example, animistically – as Mari Joerstad does[6]. Monotheists of many kinds often challenge the shaping of relational persons into consumers. However, some dominant kinds of Christian monotheism (especially those complicit with or acquiescent to the privatization of religion) do proffer a temptation towards human separatism. I think this would surprise Medieval Christians, among others. Certainly, however, the "imitation of [their transcendent] God" continues to tempt some Christians to find bodies, senses, and location problematic. And the European Enlightenment expanded that "imitation" by fantasizing the possibility of universal truths and objective knowledge.

The 'imitation of their transcendent God' continues to tempt some Christians to find bodies, senses, and location problematic. And the European Enlightenment expanded that 'imitation' by fantasizing the possibility of universal truths and objective knowledge.

In contrast, I wanted to think about religion as an aspect of the relationships we humans have with the larger-than-human world. We have terms like politics, economics, catering, sport and so on for some of those relationships. Where might we find religion if it isn't only in private beliefs about a transcendent deity? I think we might want to discuss the implication that because humans aren't unique, while religion is a human phenomenon, it is not only that. But it is challenging enough to begin with the question of what aspect of our inherent relationality "religion" might label.

Adrián Navigante: As I said above, your idea of religion is deeply influenced by ethnology, not only the ethnology of distant cultures but also the critical ethnology of our own cultural expressions and their deep-rooted ideological motivations. Irving Hallowell's ethnography of the Ojibwa has been very important for you, as you yourself acknowledge in the preface to your book. His research work is one of the first examples in which ethnology refuses to "scientifically objectify" *the others* and adopts instead an attitude of respect and a dialogical openness toward the others' exercise of "interspecies relationality" (that phrase being your programmatic definition of religion). Bruno Latour's systematic attempt at symmetrization of cultures through a critique of the ideological conflation of "epistemological objectivity and

6 Mari Joerstad, *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics*, Cambridge 2019.

"neutral point of view on reality" that has taken place in the West since we declared ourselves "modern" is something you avail yourself of, for example when you write: "In truth, there has never been a pure modernity, so we have never been completely modern. We have, however, been trying rather hard" (p. 199). Could you elaborate on the importance of Hallowell and Latour in your own thought and on the importance of their work for the present global context?

Graham Harvey: I first encountered Hallowell's article about Ojibwa ontology after I'd become interested in contemporary Indigenous animism. That followed a powerful moment when an eagle flew a perfect circle around a drum group at the end of a powwow that contributed to the revitalization of the Mi'kmaq community in Newfoundland. I'd experienced similar inter-species interactions among Pagans but wanted to know how Indigenous communities understood and celebrated them. In the context of further research among Pagans, I had an opportunity to visit another Ojibwe community than the one Hallowell writes about. Ojibwa and Ojibwe are just two of the ways related people name themselves – and many prefer a version of the name Anishinaabe.

I'm not sure who introduced me to Hallowell's work – or whether it was before or after I read Nurit Bird-David's "re-visitation" to the term "animism"[7]. But it was revelatory and inspirational. As you say, Hallowell insisted on respect and dialogue, and therefore opened up the possibility of changing the terms of inter-cultural conversations and research. Although he certainly sought to explain how animism makes sense in the Anishinaabe world, Hallowell raised the possibility of asking how Modernity's project of de-animation makes any sense. Tim Ingold and others have taken up that question.

It was, however, Hallowell's report and reflections on an elder's enigmatic response to a question about the aliveness of stones ("some are") that has been most productive for me and others. The key here is not a generalized theory of animacy or of relationality – provocative as those might be – but a specific concern with improving relationships across species boundaries.

And this might explain why Bruno Latour's work has also inspired me. He was certainly not the first scholar to challenge human exceptionalism or the veracity of Modernist ontological explanations. His contributions to Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and Science and Technology Studies (STS) were in conversation with a host of others – some more explicitly that others. Equally, much of what he wrote about ontology and social relations beyond the merely human purview of much of what passes for Social Sciences was entirely obvious to many Indigenous people. The inspiration of Davi Kopenawa, mediated by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro is recognizable (if inadequately referenced) in Latour's work.

Nonetheless, if one phrase from Hallowell's writing stands out ("some are"), so one phrase in Latour's work speaks volumes. That is the title of his book *We have never been modern*. What, then, have we been? How have we deluded ourselves? Why do we try so hard to be (more) Modern? Why are our universities still structured on Modernity's separation of humans from others? In short, Latour's work introduced me to an explosion of work that reconfigures Western scholarship about relations and relationality.

Adrián Navigante: Another main inspiration for your book, which you explicitly mention in the sixth chapter, has been Te Pakaka Tawhai's article on Māori religion, which you included in a volume you edited in 2002 on Indigenous religions[8]. Apart from an open recognition of Tawhai's contribution to the understanding of Māori religion, you rely mainly on a phrase in his article whose validity is not reduced to the Māori setting: the purpose of religious activity is *to do violence with impunity*. Your comment on this phrase deserves to be

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7 Nurit Bird-David, "Animism Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology, in: Current Anthropology, Vol. 40, N° S1, Special Issue Culture – A Second Chance? (February 1999), pp. 67-91.

8 Graham Harvey (ed.), *Readings in Indigenous Religions*, London, Continuum, 2002. Tawhai's article had originally been published in Steward Sutherland and Peter Clarke (ed.), *The Study of Religion: Traditional and New Religion*, London, Routledge, 1988.

quoted: "I found myself wondering whether Tawhai's statement [...] applies to religious activities elsewhere. Perhaps it may even be true of religious activities *everywhere*" (p. 99). There are many ways of interpreting Tawhai's phrase. You emphasize the relational, performative, and worldly aspect of it: religion is not about redemption and salvation, or praise and thanksgiving, but rather about permission and placation, an interplay of desires and fears, an exercise of diplomacy to reduce antipathies and hostilities in one's own relational field. This means that the relational field, even in its healthy manifestations, implies destruction and predation, and the best we can do is to become profoundly aware of the degree of predation we need to exercise so as not to overstep it. I tend to think that performative sacralization (for example the mechanics of sacrifice) is a way of steering that economy of violence. But if I am right in reading you like that, there remains one point that baffles me. Christianity, or at least the Western reception of the New Testament, does not think this way. On the contrary, its message is the end of the economy of violence, and the conviction that the consequence of violent acts is more violence. What are the reasons that lead you to affirm that Tawhai's phrase applies to religious activities *everywhere*?

Graham Harvey: Briefly and provocatively put: who do they think they are kidding? It is too abundantly clear to many people that Christianity has never rejected the economy of violence. The conquest of what has become the Americas, for instance, was founded on explicit assertions of the need to commit violence to civilize savages. Enslavement and genocide were justifiable – if not to all – as methods for expanding the Christian economy and ecology.

Enslavement and genocide were justifiable – if not to all – as methods for expanding the Christian economy and ecology.

But, more positively, the saying of grace before meals, and the regular celebration of the "sacrifice of the mass" suggest (at least, or at least to me) that Tawhai's phrase *might* be analytically powerful in Christian and other contexts. However, the core reason for my thinking affirming the applicability of Tawhai's phrase elsewhere is that everybody (human or otherwise) needs to consume others and needs to justify it somehow. I know, of course, that it is entirely possible to predate and consume others without conducting rituals and without respect. Our extractivist culture makes that painfully clear. So, I am being deliberately provocative. My point is really that the academic study of religions has deployed an entirely Protestant Christian obsession with "belief in God" as if that were definitive of all religions. As it doesn't work (because both "belief" and "God" are not concerns in *all* religions), what happens if we start elsewhere? And Tawhai's phrase has the immense benefit of raising questions about food, sex and strangers in interestingly multi-species ways.

Adrián Navigante: That the works of Hallowell, Latour and Tawhai have influenced your understanding of religion in terms of material, embodied and performative relationality between humans and non-humans, should not surprise your readers. But there is another figure that in my opinion plays an important role, contrary to most people's expectations: Charles Darwin. He belongs, together with Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, to the stronghold of critical modernity (which rejects religion of any denomination and kind). His materialist ontology does not seem at all to have room for the kind of subjectivation of non-humans that is to be found in some non-Western religious systems and the "indigenous epistemologies" inherent to them – nowadays becoming ostensible due to the so-called ontological turn in anthropology. Darwin's evolution theory is built upon a complex mechanics of adaptation to change and local circumstances; his main concepts like "environment" and "organism" do not point to intersubjective socialization but rather to a biomechanical and non-directional pattern of change; intelligence is an evolutionary accident only reserved to humans. However, in some ways that I fail to grasp, Darwin's position comes for you very close to what you thematize in your book from the perspective of non-Western forms of religiosity. The real world we inhabit, you write in the first chapter, "is the world of Darwinian evolving relationality" (p. 4). In the fifth chapter you bring into the discussion Darwin's tree of life as an element that "frees us from the fantasy that

the cosmos was designed for us" (p. 82). In the seventh chapter, Darwin appears as an intermediate instance between the fully relational world of animism and the fully atomized world of modern science, since "he has revealed [that the world is] purely relational" (p. 126). Finally, in the last chapter you go so far as to say: "we have failed to follow Darwin into a vibrantly relational world" (p. 203). Could you explain the place of Darwin in your own elaboration and in your (new) understanding of religion?

Graham Harvey: I suspect I have reduced Darwin to the author of a catch-phrase or slogan. And I certainly haven't engaged with him in a thorough manner – but I love his experiments with earthworms. I think I was only trying to say that evolution is all about relationality and never about separatism or exceptionalism (human or otherwise). It is an aspect of our kinship with the rest of the world – and especially with those with whom we still co-evolve, such as bacteria. My use or abuse of Darwin is meant to aid those who think animism is an alien notion to realize that they probably have no trouble with various aspects of relationality.

Adrián Navigante: To conclude this part of the interview, I will go back to your title: *Food, Sex and Strangers*. The first word, "food", points to the necessity and the implications of killing for one's own survival. Religion appears as a mechanism through which the exercise of that violence is rendered impure – not only from a moral point of view, but also from the point of view of soul predation and its consequences. "Sex" appears as an instance of intimacy, like food: the ones with whom we share that intimacy are those familiar to us, the others are "strangers". Now, in a religious context this delimitation goes beyond merely human interaction. People share food (and even sexual intimacy) with gods, animals, and different sorts of spirits. Could we say, bearing in mind all these factors, that the materiality you emphasize in the study of religion – religion as something we can see, smell, hear, taste or touch – is profoundly animistic, and that the more "material" we become, the more re-enchanted we render the world?

Graham Harvey: Exactly! Once we reject the fantasy that "material" means "inert" (or any of the things implied there – possibly lack of agency but certainly lack of concern or desire), we find that our materiality links us to a world full of kin and of wonder.

Classic currents in phenomenology, in environmental writing (poetry as well as academic texts), and in multiple Indigenous novels, make this link between sensing bodies and the sensual world evident. They encourage that enchantment (which has never been completely crushed). But here are inspirational words from David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous*[9] (which I ought to have quoted more often):

> "Magic [synonymous here with enchantment and animism], then, in its perhaps most primordial sense, is the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives – from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of glass itself – is an *experiencing* form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own." (pp. 9-10).

III. ANIMISM: RESPECTING THE LIVING WORLD

Adrián Navigante: Your book *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, published for the first time in 2005, with two revised and updated reeditions (2017 and 2019)[10], is the result

9 David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, New York 2017 [first edition 1997].

10 Source references related to this book in the third part of the interview refer to the 2019 edition

of a very ambitious project. It aims to cover the history of animism and elucidate the very important change in the Western reception of the concept, but it also contains "case studies" (from Ojibwa and Māori to Eco-Pagan Activism in Europe), anthropological and philosophical issues (shamans, spirits, personhood, etc.) and a program for the future (the challenges of animism in the contemporary global situation). You deal with very important and complex issues in the book on which we can barely scratch the surface in this interview, but I will try to point to some of them. The framework of your historical reconstruction of animism can be summarized in the two kinds of animism you define at the beginning of the book, which are the opposite poles of the historical spectrum you problematize. The first one, related to Edward B. Tylor's position in *Primitive Culture* (1871), is "belief in spirits or non-empirical beings", and it presupposes a cognitive error on the part of "primitives" as to the nature of reality – which will be corrected by modern epistemology. The second is "concern with knowing how to behave appropriately towards persons, not all of whom are human" (Preface, p. xvii). The first definition is epistemological and presupposes an evolutionary theory of human thought from its animistic origins to secular science, the second is strictly ethnological and demands a generous degree of cultural relativism to deal with different frameworks of experience and social organization in their own inherent consistency. However, they are not strictly separated in your book. Your definition of the new kind of animism implies the acceptance of a new epistemology which radically inverts Tylor's main conviction (that of XIX century anthropology of religion) expressed in the following quotation: "The sense of an absolute psychical distinction between man and beast, so prevalent in the civilized world, is hardly to be found among the lower races. Men to whom the cries of beasts and birds seem like human language, and their actions guided as it were by human thoughts, logically enough allow the existence of souls of beasts, birds, and reptiles, as to men. The lower psychology cannot but recognize in beasts the very characteristics which it attributes to the human soul, namely, the phenomena of life and death, will and judgement, and the phantom seen in vision or in dream" (Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, Vol.1, Cambridge 2010, p. 423). My question is whether this epistemology, which stems from the observation and study of other cultures, should in your opinion be symmetricized to the point of saying that is it not "the primitives" but "*us moderns*" who "got it all wrong". In other words: Should the ethnological revision and correction of old prejudices be carried out to the point of adopting certain criteria – like shamanic interactions with non-humans or the synchronic environmental logic of oracular divination – as epistemological challenges for our own worldview and mode of behavior?

We are constituted by our co-evolution within multi-species communities. We are symbiotic with other kin. We have tried to be individuals, autonomous subjects, but can only do so by ignoring all the evidence of our inherent relationality.

Graham Harvey: The short answer is an unequivocal "yes! we have got it all wrong". We have worked remarkably hard to become Moderns. Happily, we have not completely succeeded – and, indeed, cannot. We are constituted by our co-evolution within multi-species communities. We are symbiotic with other kin. We have tried to be individuals, autonomous subjects, but can only do so by ignoring all the evidence of our inherent relationality. And here I do not only mean the evidence from ethnographies about Indigenous peoples, nor that from Indigenous educators. I mean the results of "Western" scientific observation and experimentation. We are not merely hosts of good and bad bacteria. Rather, they are among the parts of what makes me a "we": a continuous interaction of beings, "persons, most of whom are not human, but all of whom deserve respect" (to quote myself). They are part of what makes us "dividuals" in Marilyn Strathern's sense.

And, to your point, yes, our currently, entrained, and entrenched standard methods for

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published by Hurst & Company (London).

observing and learning about other-than-human beings are insufficient for learning among and from them. Since we misunderstand ourselves (e.g., imagining ourselves to have unique cognitive abilities), we are unlikely to be able to adapt our criteria and practices to help us hear those others. There are efforts in this direction – e.g., by scholars within the ANT and STS camps. Vinciane Despret's *What would animals say if we asked the right questions* (2016)[11] is an excellent example. But shamans and diviners do not only ask good questions; they listen and watch (and otherwise sense) for generous communications initiated by others. They open themselves to what others might wish to say. They inherit, test, and improve methods for knowing whether members of other species are ready and willing to address, educate and/or celebrate with us. In particular, shamans and diviners gain expertise to know that they are ignorant and fragile, needing advice and guidance. They share with their (human) communities a notion that other beings might be persuaded to help. Some do so by enabling visions and other powerful experiences of engagement with the larger world.

I think I can say that now that we know that the world is a made of diverse multi-species communities, full of communicative possibilities, scholars and all of us (Indigenous or recovering-Moderns alike) need to experiment with the kind of knowledge methods Tylor and co denigrated. And this is beyond urgent in this world so badly damaged and endangered by the pursuit of human separatism and consumerism.

Adrián Navigante: You take seriously Irving Hallowell's re-definition of "truly objective research" which introduces two changes in the way ethnologists were supposed to deal with their object of field study. A dialogical narrative of participation instead of a monological and distanced description of the indigenous communities in question, and – even more challenging – the extension of that "dialogue" toward the other-than-human members of those communities. In the preface you declare these two aspects to be the foundations of your book: "a dialogical methodology and an understanding of what the term 'person' means" (p. xxi). Two questions come to mind in reflecting on this matter: Do you think that a Western ethnologist can not only try to grasp an animistic setting but also *act* as an animist within the community he is researching if he engages in a true dialogue with its human members (and if so, which were the parameters of this dialogue?) Would the extension of the dialogue to the other-than-human members imply a radical modification of the way in which the ethnologist *should behave* to keep his research going? I am thinking, with regard to this second question, of Bruce Albert's and Davi Kopenawa's dialogue, in which the ethnology of the "invisible beings of the forest" (*xapiri pë*) was carried out by the shaman, and on the position of some other – less conventional or official – anthropologists who say that the "ontological shock" caused by the ingestion of some plants in local contexts results in a kind of "wild shamanization of the anthropologist" (if you allow me this parody of the Bastidian notion of *mystique sauvage*).

Graham Harvey: Indeed, we need more dialogue, more dialogical methods and dialogical narratives. When I was transitioning from being a scholar of ancient texts to one intrigued by contemporary lived religions, I was told many times that research could only be respectful if scholars were ready to be changed and willing to benefit their hosts in some way. In recent years there has been a lot of talk about decolonizing the academy. As Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) have said powerfully: decolonization is not a metaphor[12]. But clearly it is just and only that in many academic contexts. Neo-liberal university managers certainly do not want anything radical to happen. Decolonization will not be complete when Indigenous knowledges and ontologies are included in curricula. It is not over because we can publish books proposing that we have never been Modern or demonstrating that we have, despite everything, remained

11 Original in French: *Que diraient les animaux si... on leur posait les bonnes questions* ? Paris 2012.

12 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, Decolonization is not a metaphor, in: *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society,* Vol.1, N°1, 2012, pp. 1-40.

kin. Decolonization must be about learning other ways to know. It must result in the rejection of the distinction between "natural" and "human" sciences founded on the faulty and destructive nature/culture divide. Perhaps this end can be reached for by acknowledging that far from promoting universal knowledge, the academy has elevated one local knowledge against all others.

I should have said much earlier that there is no single "Indigenous knowledge", epistemology or ontology, just as there are multiple Indigenous communities. These too are local knowledges – but many with perspectives and applications that can be extended internationally or even globally. So, just as Indigenous knowledges have been tested over generations, they can be experimented with, in dialogue, to see how they might aid the challenges of the contemporary world. This, I think, is part of what the Zapatistas and scholars like Arturo Escobar mean by "the world in which many worlds are possible"[13].

So, to your question, "can a Western ethnographer act as an animist?" I see no reason why not. And many reasons why we should. Again, if we've never ceased being kin, we can learn locally appropriate etiquette for dialogues with our hosts. We will have to learn to acknowledge our ignorance and even foolishness in not already knowing what is obvious in many communities. I don't think foolishness is a rare feeling for ethnographers but admitting it and seeing it through might require some adjustment.

Regarding your reference to Bruce Albert's and Davi Kopenawa's dialogue and to those who've experienced the "ontological shock" leading to the "wild shamanization of the anthropologist" indicate, some knowledge methods might be hard to get past a university ethics committee. Nonetheless, there are elders, shamans, plants, and fungi ready to help scholars re-engage with the larger-than-human community. And there is a community that might (after testing us) be ready of that re-engagement.

Adrián Navigante: Let's plunge into what you consider the main notion of the new kind of animism: *personhood*. The methodological potential of this concept lies in the extension of the field of "social relations" from the merely human to the other-than-human world. The implications of this extension not only differ from the Christian notion of person (which privileges humans as *imago Dei* and a specific notion of the divine ontologically discontinuous with the whole natural world – and even hostile to its Pagan deities), but also from the modern idea of person (in terms of intentional subjectivity endowed with rationality and moral values). In an animistic setting, relations are not only interaction of organisms or adaptation patterns. If we take the ethnographical literature from different parts of the world seriously, the way in which indigenous groups are said to relate with other-than-human beings is neither instinctive nor metaphorical, but a complex social articulation including a myriad of activities such as hunting, eating, having sex, dreaming, performing ritual, and spinning myths – all these activities having a strictly *intersubjective* sense. In your book one notices a certain caution or ambivalence regarding the extent to which you assume the implications of taking not only ethnographical literature seriously (one does not need to be animist for that) but also the permeability of other modalities of world-configuration into our own – including the language of scholarly reflection. If I may quote you, "Persons are related beings constituted by their many and various interactions with others. Persons are sociable beings who communicate with others. Persons need to be taught by stages what it means to be a person" (p. 18). Readers could easily take such declarations in a metaphorical sense and translate "relations" in terms of biological interaction of organisms, or "sociable" in a behavioristic sense – i. e. dolphins, rats, and bees "socialize" in a way, but – unlike humans – without notion of self or complex brain processes. Such consideration would certainly not encompass the type of knowledge obtained by an Amazonian shaman in the rain forest or concretized in the fabrication of an African power object. I would like to know whether your notion of personhood – derived from that

13 Cf. *supra*, footnote 3.

of Irving Hallowell – intends to be a descriptive tool to better account for other – animistic – modalities of relation (where animal or plant spirits are taken as *equally subjective* as humans), or whether it aims at becoming a critical weapon against the hitherto undisputed validity of the scientific and technical worldview.

Graham Harvey: I really should have written more clearly! I think my only caution or ambivalence was about the possibility of being read as suggesting "this is all easy". In Indigenous communities, elders learn to socialize more with practice. They learn by interacting with others – other elders, with tabaco, eagles, rocks, ancestors... The aid of ayahuasca and so on is needed because relational animistic personhood is not a given but an ambition. That is, all beings are necessarily relations of all others. That's the kind of foundation Darwin's sketchbook tree of life and "I think" indicates. But even with close human kin – parents and children, or spouses for example – we learn to relate better (hopefully) by each interaction. Put differently: anyone can talk to a tree; it takes time to listen. And, importantly, some of that time might be spent just "being in the presence" until the tree accepts that the "listener" is worth addressing.

Anyone can talk to a tree; it takes time to listen. And, importantly, some of that time might be spent just 'being in the presence' until the tree accepts that the "listener" is worth addressing.

I have no difficulty asserting that all kinds of persons can and do deliberately interact with others when they wish to. Humans have no distinctive abilities or characteristics - even negatively. My suspicion is that, just like humans, lots of other beings wish everyone else would stop being lazy and try harder to understand. That, I think, is what happens when the sparrows nesting in our roof eaves shout at us.

So, no, "relations" and "kin" are not poetic metaphors but efforts to both clarify and complexify the notion of personhood. Everything is relational, some relations are closer than others, and all relationships can be improved (or worsened). The challenge is to hear / read these words without thinking that humans (or particular kinds of human) best exemplify them. We are only persons when and as we actively engage with others. Contrary to Monty Python's Brian we are not individuals. We are relations. All of us. But our ability to relate well requires learning. By all of us, human or hedgehog...

In that vein, the notion of personhood I derive from Hallowell's learning among the Anishinaabeg – and from my encounters with other teachers (human or otherwise) – is both about expressing an animist world and about contesting the human exceptionalism of Modernity's world.

Perhaps that makes it do too much work. Similarly, much as I love Hallowell's phrase "other-than-human persons" I have found that too many people think it refers to "spirits" rather than "animals", to metaphysics rather than bodied realities. That remains a challenge.

Adrián Navigante: Following Irving Hallowell and his reflections on Ojibwe discourse, you extend the category of "personhood" or "social agents" to objects like sticks, stones, shells, and kettles. While Hallowell follows linguistic indicators within a specific cultural complex, the question in your book is much broader, so the challenge seems to lie in the task of re-thinking notions like "body" and "selfhood" no longer as existential conditions to produce affects, effects and changes other embodied selves and their environment, but rather as the consequence of a layout or an assemblage of affects and effects configurating relations and ending in subjective formations. You write: "the agency and intentionality of human persons affects objects that are utilized culturally so that these objects become, in some sense, subjects. This may be an opposing move to the one in which 'enemies' are de-personalized and dehumanized" (p. 108). I wonder whether this subjectivation of objects that you see in animistic settings has in any way at least an indirect relationship with the "work of art" in modern Western culture. Secularized as it may be, and progressively integrated in a logic of marketing and commodification, there remains a space (from the visionary poetry of William Blake to the magical paintings of Austin Osman Spare or Antonin Artaud's phonetic alchemy and theater of cruelty) in which objects –

including the material body – become not only aesthetically prominent or de-familiarized (as the Russian formalists said) but also sites of a mysterious non-human agency with a personality (or many personalities) of their own. Is there in your opinion a form of "animism" that survives through aesthetic subversion and alternative forms of creative or even transgressive imagination in a "de-souled" social setting like our highly urbanized, market-oriented, and technologically dominated society?

Graham Harvey: I continue to struggle with the animacy of things. Perhaps I'm still trapped by the question "are they alive?". And even the question of whether something needs an experience of selfhood is challenging. But Kiiwiich's answer to Hallowell's question about stones is helpful[14]. The right question isn't "are they alive?" but "how is our relationship?" Things (if I can use that word for "made stuff" or artefacts for now) interact with other existences. Art works on us. We are changed by our interactions with glasses, computers, baskets and more. And they are changed too. I'm not sure why I have a problem saying that a cup is kin when I can easily insist that trees are. I'm still working through my struggles with the de-animated Modern ontology and the English language which makes some things hard to say.

But you also challenge me to address the "de-souled" urbanized, market-orientated, technological dominated society. There is certainly a foundational form of animism that has not yet been eradicated by the "world destroying machine" (as Isabelle Stengers calls Modernity)[15]. We remain kin whether we know it, acknowledge it, celebrate it or not. If we are not fully Modern, we are at least still partly animistic. But the recognition of our relatedness is not merely descriptive. It has to be resistant to the destruction of life. It must seek to increase the opportunities for more respectful relating.

I am also conscious that there are ways of thinking about "animism" in relation to the oppressive actions of technologies. The current obsession with AI re-animates fears that robots will take control. But in many ways, the global addiction to consumerism and acquisition already indicate that we have handed control to our artefacts. Just as our Amazonianist colleagues speak about "dark shamanism" (perhaps what would be called sorcery elsewhere) perhaps we should speak about "dark animism" in relation to the forces that threaten our relational world.

Adrián Navigante: The idea of "respecting the living world" does not imply in itself crossing ontological boundaries or even delving into animistic societies to the point of "being changed" (like Edith Turner in Zambia or Paul Stoller in Niger). Precisely because of this, a watered-down form of "neo-animism", over-adapted to the individualistic needs of capitalist consumerists, inevitably flourishes and expands itself in the West. Supported by the idea of non-dogmatic attitude and individual freedom, this exoticized variant of animism threatens to superimpose itself over authentic efforts to grasp other modes of relation (doing justice to their specific cultural formations, usually devaluated and oppressed) and decondition our own way of seeing and experiencing the world. Your book deals with cases whose very setting and field of resonance are inevitably faced with this problematic: Eco-Pagan gatherings, festivals, communities, and spiritual circles. There is not only the danger of a romanticization of Nature in such initiatives, where real phenomena from animistic settings (from an a-moral interaction with forces to forms of psychological or even physical cannibalism) are banished from the word go, but also a tendency to blend or fuse animistic re-enchantment of the world and commodity fetichism (whose phantom objectivity is, as Michael Taussig says, also a kind of "animated substance"). Do you share this concern of mine? If so, where do you think one should draw the line, and how?

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14 Kiiwiich was an Anishinaabe elder and medicine man, whom Irving Hallowell asked the following question: "Are all the stones we see about us here alive?" (cf. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View", in: *Culture in History*, ed. by Stanley Diamond, New York 1960, pp. 19-52).

15 See Isabelle Stengers' conversation with Marc Higgins and Maria Wallace "In Conversation with Isabelle Stengers: Ontological Politics in Catastrophic Times", published in *Reimagining Science Education in the Anthropocene*, Vol. 2, ed. by Sara Tolbert, Maria Wallace, Marc Higgins and Jesse Bazzul, Cham 2024.

Graham Harvey: Certainly, there is a temptation to romanticize Nature – and not only among Pagans. Perhaps this is a licensed form of Green Washing: astronauts' photographs of "Gaia" and colourful evocations of "Mother Earth" might do little to contest humanity's dominance of Earth's life. Rather, they might encourage us to continue thinking we humans are separate from everything else – and can or even should manage the world. But I find the very idea that there is a realm called "Nature" enough of a problem. I've been saying recently that if we could stop using the word all sorts of things might be better.

I think we're only at the beginning of contesting Modernity in its most Modern contexts (universities in particular). While I agree that animism can be subverted or domesticated as another romanticism and/or primitivism, I think what we're seeing is the continuing emergence of experiments in animistic re-enchantment. If we can reinforce the radical push of these experiments in the direction of contesting the "machine" – and not just decorating the edges of business as usual – I'm hopeful that our shared concerns will be met. That is, this animism has to be decolonizing and truly ecological (collaborating with other humans and other-than-humans in enhancing the well-being of diverse communities).

Adrián Navigante: In your re-evaluation and revalorization of animism, the task of reconfiguring Western epistemologies and ontologies proves to be central, but this does not mean that every proposal of reconfiguration goes in the direction of an "animistic turn". In the last part of your book, you are concerned with differential notions of embodiment and matter, from post-modern feminist theories to quantum physics. This opens the door to a very complex and in my opinion problematic question: *techno*-animism. In the volume you edited with Miguel Astor-Aguilera in 2018, *Rethinking Relations and Animism*[16], you included an essay by Fabio Gygi on this subject, in which the latter refers to techno-animism in Japan in words of Anne Allison: "animating contemporary technology and commodities with spirits and reconfiguring intimate attachments" (p. 94). As I said in my previous question, there are good reasons to distinguish (from a philosophical, historical and anthropological perspective) between forms of animism in non-Western societies and forms of commodity fetichism in Western (or global) capitalism. Which reasons – if any – do you consider in order to rethink, relativize or problematize this distinction?

Graham Harvey: Commodification is, perhaps, the defining characteristic of Modernity and its capitalism and consumerism. In that context, I see the need to rethink our relationships not only with technologies as well as with what we might call biotic communities. Part of my struggle with these issues is another linguistic and more-than-linguistic one. How do we retrieve "materialism" from the grasp of the dualisms that separate parts of reality from others? How do we recover a sense that "materials" and "matter" are kin and worthy of cooperating with? We are still entangled with the commodification of humans and of labor. How will we persuade others that other worlds are possible? I'm hopeful because Indigenous people are increasingly vocal and beginning to be heard in global forums. I'm hopeful that some Pagans, at least, are catching what Robin Kimmerer calls "infectious gratitude" that will infuse renewed efforts at better kinship relations. So, yes, problematize alongside the celebration of life. •

16 *Rethinking Relations and Animism: Personhood and Materiality,* edited by Graham Harvey and Miguel Astor Aguilera, London 2020. The following quotation in Adrián Navigante's question refers to this book.

40

Graham Harvey

Professor of Religious Studies
Open University, UK



AN ANIMIST MANIFESTO

All that exists lives
All that lives is worthy of respect

You don't have to like what you respect
Not liking someone is no reason for not respecting them
Respecting someone is no reason for not eating them

> Reasons are best worked out in relationship – especially if you are looking for reasons to eat someone – or if you are looking for reasons not to be eaten

If you agree that all that exists is alive and worthy of respect, it is best to talk abou T'persons' or 'people' rather than 'beings' or 'spirits', let alone 'biomechanisms', 'resources', 'possessions', and 'objects'

The world is full of persons (people if you prefer), but few of them are human

> The world is full of other---than---human persons
> The world is full of other---than---oak persons
> The world is full of other---than---hedgehog persons
> The world is full of other---than---salmon persons
> The world is full of other---than---kingfisher persons
> The world is full of other---than---rock persons...

'other---than' has at least three references:

> it reminds us that we are persons in relationship with others,

> it reminds us that many of our closest kin are human, while the closest kind of oaks are oaks, so we talk most easily with humans while rocks talk most easily with other rocks...
> it reminds us to speak first of what we know best (those closest to us)

Make that four references:

> it reminds us to celebrate difference as an opportunity to expand our relationships rather than seeing it as a cause of conflict or conquest

All life is relational and we should not collapse our intimate alterities into identities
Others and otherness keep us open to change, open to becoming, never finally fixed in being

Alterities resist entropy and encourage creativity through relationality, sociality (or, as William Blake said, 'enmity is true friendship')

Animism is neither monist nor dualist, it is only just beginning when you get beyond counting one, two... At its best it is thoroughly, gloriously, unashamedly, rampantly pluralist

Respect means being cautious and constructive
It is cautiously approaching others — and our own wishes,
It is constructing relationships, constructing opportunities to talk, to relate, to listen, to spend time in the face---to---face presence and company of others
It is taking care of, caring for, caring about, being careful about...
It can be shown by leaving alone and by giving gifts

> believers in 'human rights', for example, demonstrate their belief in rights not only by supporting legislation to protect individuals from states, companies and majorities, but by not insisting on hogging the whole road or pavement, not insisting on another human getting out of the way on a busy street...

You don't have to hug every tree to show them respect but you might have to let trees grow where they will—you might have to move your telephone lines or greenhouse
You might have to build that road away from that rock or that tree

Hugging trees that you don't know may be rude – try introducing yourself first

Just because the world and the cosmos is full of life does not make it a nice and easy place to live. Lots of persons are quite unfriendly to others. Many see us as a good dinner. They might respect us as they eat us. Or they may need education. Like us, they might learn best in relationship with others who show respect even to those they don't like, and especially to those they like the taste of.

Although evolution has no aim, life is not pointless. The purpose of life is to be good

people — and good humans or good rocks or good badgers. What we have to find out is what 'good' means where we are, when we are, with whom we are, and so on. It is certainly wrapped up with the word 'respect' and all the acts that implies.

Since all that exists lives—and since all that lives is, in some senses, to some degree, conscious, communicative and relational—and since many of the persons with whom we humans share this planet have a far better idea of what's going on than we do—we can now stop all the silliness about being the pinnacle of creation, the highest achievement of evolution, the self---consciousness of the world or cosmos... We're just part of the whole living community and we've got a lot to learn. Our job isn't to save the planet, or speak for the animals, or evolve towards higher states. Many other---than--- human people are already happily self---aware, thank you very much, and if we paid attention we might learn a few things ourselves. By the way, we're probably not alone in mistaking ourselves for the most important people in the world: hedgehogs probably think they are (but they're spiky flea---ridden beasts so why believe them?!).

Um, when I said that 'all that exists lives', I'm not sure about plastic bags.

But I am certain that we should not treat objects as mere resources, somehow available or even given to us, or humanity, to use as we will or wish. There is a difference between 'things' and 'objects'. The way we speak is part of the way we treat others. Things can thing with us (that's a cunning if obscure reference to the Saxon word for a council or parliament, a 'thing'). Objects just get looked at, used, throw. Relating with things is different to relating to objects.

> By the way, there is no 'away' to throw things to.

Similarly, with words like 'substances', especially those that exist within plant and fungal persons. There are substances, but they aren't ours until they are given, gifted to us. And then we'd better find out why we've been given whatever gifts we get. And we'd better ask how those gifts might be best used (whether it"s for pleasure, power, wisdom or whatever). This is especially true if the plant or mushroom person who offers us the gift substance has to lose their life in the process.

Maybe sometimes the mushrooms just want to help us join in the big conversation that's going on all around us. But not all rocks, fish, plants, fungi, birds, animals or humans want to talk with us:

> Sometimes they want to be quiet
> Sometimes they want to be rude
> Sometimes they have other concerns
> Sometimes they don't understand
> Sometimes we don't speak the language
> Sometimes we don't know the appropriate gift

The precise and proper way to show respect depends where you are, who you are, who you are respecting and what they expect. Gifts, like swords and words, have more than one side. Alcohol is a gift in one place, a poison somewhere else. Handshakes are friendly in one place, shows of strength elsewhere. Kissing is

respectful to some people, an assault on others. Respectful etiquette is hard work but its reward is fuller participation in a large and exciting community of life.

Sometimes we need shamans to do the talking for us
Sometimes we need shamans to do the talking to us

Animism is just over the bridge that closes the Cartesian gap by knowing how to answer the question, what is your favourite colour? Perhaps it is the bridge. Perhaps there is no gap and animists are people who refuse to collude with the illusion.

Animism is often discovered by sitting beneath trees, on hills, in rivers, with hedgehogs, beside fires... Animism is better communicated in trickster tales, soulful songs, powerful poems, rousing rituals, and/or elemental etiquette than in manifestos. •

Jeffrey J. Kripal
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LOSING WORLDS TO THINK AFTER THEM: TRANSVERSAL REFLECTIONS FROM A COMPARATIVE CLASSROOM

In this essay, Jeffrey J. Kripal offers his point of view on the question of transversality *related to his own profession (university professor of History of Religions in the United States), his research work and anomalous experiences in South Asia, his dialogue with Adrián Navigante, and his way of recapturing the heritage of the American counterculture in a period of cultural crisis and renovation.*

Combining anecdotical wit with philosophical speculation, Jeffrey Kripal looks back in history to reassess his own itinerary beyond the limits of events, frameworks, and interpretations, opening a direction toward a new form of comparativism in which the old division between scholarly and artistic style, textual and pre-textual level, thought processes and writing, are not only blurred but principally surpassed.

You have no business being a scholar of religion until you have lost at least two worlds. (what I say to my doctoral students)

One often learns what one is doing in a mirror, that is, in the eyes of others. This has certainly been true of my little life. I do not know what I think until I write it out for others to read. I also learn what I think by teaching and lecturing, that is, by spontaneously saying what I have to say out loud in front of a group of people, who can then reflect it back to me--critically, appreciatively, or, more likely, a bit of both. Perhaps most of all, I learn what I think through the perspectives of colleagues, to whom I listen intently and vulnerably. Thought is dialectical, dialogical, a relationship through and through "Socratic," as we say in the academy.

Few have taught me as much about the paradoxical practices of transcultural comparison as Adrián Navigante. I mean that. I am not bullshitting, as we used to say in the American Midwest. I am not exaggerating, as I suppose we would say in a more genteel code today. Here is what happened. At the end of May of 2023, Navigante invited me to The Labyrinth outside of Rome, Italy, to co-lead two private seminars with him, both on my own published work. The first, entitled "Vision and Impossible Experience" (May 26-28, 2023), was with a group of Jungian therapists in training, an event for which Navigante discussed my memoir/manifesto, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (2017). The second, entitled "Whither the Superhumanities? Critical and Creative Reflections on Some 'New Humanisms' for the XXI Century" (June 1-4, 2023), consisted of a group of European intellectuals who were asked to speak to *The Superhumanities: Historical Precedents, Moral Objections, New Realities* (2022).

What struck me most about these events and the friendship that followed in their wake is a single word that Navigante kept using: "transversal." He used it to describe his own deep experience and learning process in South Asian Shakta Tantra and West African Fa Divination as a poet who had grown up in Argentina, spent time in India, England, and France, was trained in philosophy in Germany, and now spends most of his time in Italy working at his new creation, the Center *Interstices*, dedicated to the practice of multiple worldviews, and also collaborating with a study center founded by the Indologist, musicologist, and Shaivite initiate Alain Daniélou (1907-1994). I do not think it is tangential at all that Daniélou loved men and existentially converted to what he understood as a form of Hindu polytheism, that is, he lived and loved well outside the gender, sexual, and religious norms of European society.

This profound fact was captured for me in one of the paintings of Daniélou's residency, The Labyrinth. The painting, which hangs in the central library, features Daniélou himself sitting in a contemplative mood. He looks like a bishop (his brother was Cardinal Jean Daniélou). Some may think Alain is wearing a pendant featuring a dragonfly. It is actually a winged phallus – the erotic as the mystical. This is the history of religions – a "passing" in public, a long series of sexual orientations that were also spiritual orientations.

I hear a different kind of *trans-* in another word that Navigante uses to describe some aspects of my own work – "transversal." The word is derived from the French psychiatrist Félix Guattari. It is also used today in the cutting-edge discussions of world philosophy coming out of South Korea but also implied in Chinese Confucian and Daoist thought.[1] I hear the term as a kind of place-holder, a standing-in for a future paradoxical spirituality, an existential and

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1 See, for example, Hwa Yol Jung, *Phenomenology, Transversality, and World Philosophy* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2021); and Hyo-Dong Lee, *Spirit, Qi, and the Multitude: A Comparative Theology for the Democracy of Creation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

intellectual "sitting in the middle," thinking across cultures and times, refusing to sign one's name to this or that culture or practice, but also not hesitating to take initiation into this or that tradition. The spirits possess.

There is something profoundly experiential about the word "transversal," even though it is also critical of each and every deposit of human experience. It involves not just historical or textual expertise, but also initiation, possession, and mystical experience, an actual working with the spirits and not simply talking or writing about them. Such a transversal position does not "believe," not at least in any full or final fashion, but neither does it "rationalize," explain, or reduce. It does something else, something for which we do not even have a good name (yet).

Indeed, Navigante will write that "the transversal reorientation is an in-between, a work of interstices, and at this early stage it can be compared to a balancing act on a hanging bridge whose anchorage, deck and ropes are distressingly unsteady."[2] I suppose this is where I might differ. One of my most basic arguments, after all, is that what I call the comparative position (which bears real resonance with this "transversality") has in fact been developed by literally hundreds of intellectuals for a century and a half now, indeed by *thousands* of writers around the world for millennia. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of different comparative practices. Some of them are profoundly transversal.

ALTERED STATES AND COMPARISON ARE ANCIENT AND GLOBAL

This is my deeper historical point to which I wish the present essay to stand. It is something I insist on in my teaching and writing. Comparison did not begin in the nineteenth century with European philosophers and Christian colonialists. It began as far as we can see back in the historical record, and it began in altered states in individuals like the ancient Greek figures of Pythagoras and Parmenides and in complicated deposits of those altered states in texts like the Sanskrit Upanishads or the Gospel of John. The shaman, moreover, is a kind of Ur-figure here, the indigenous charismatic source and possession of nearly every kind of religiosity that came later. The shaman, diviner, or worker with the spirits is the ultimate comparative figure, even when the shaman is not "doing comparison" in any professional way.

Navigante will include many forms of knowing under the rubric of transversality, including "oracular forms of knowledge, plant-based knowledge, trance-related knowledge, mystical-hermeneutical knowledge procedures."[3] In short – divination, psychedelics, possession, and interpretive revelation. In the transversal model, these cannot be explained away by our colonial reductions, to some cabinet of curiosities, but neither can they be "taken at face value." Transversality calls us to take them all seriously but take none of them exclusively.[4] Perhaps most critically of all, Navigante will also write that, "[a] transversal reorientation does not consist in thinking differently while keeping hegemonic presuppositions intact."[5]

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2 Adrián Navigante, "Transversality: Questions of Method," *Transcultural Dialogues*, Issue 13, May 2023, Spring Equinox, 16.

3 Navigante, "Transversality," 16.

4 I have made related arguments throughout my life, including over two decades ago now in my second book, which was all about the mystical experiences of scholars of mysticism; and in my third book, which attempted to move beyond "faith" and "reason" to a new kind of "gnosis" in the comparative study of religion, that is, to a place of transcultural transversality. See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); and *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). These early books may not sufficiently embrace the critical methods of which Navigante writes, but I have tried to do so recently, particularly in *The Superhumanities: Historical Precedents, Moral Objections*, New Realities (Chicago 2022). I think Navigante and I are groping toward a common vision, with a whole host of other thinkers, activists, and artists . . . and, frankly, diviners, mediums, and psychics.

5 Navigante, "Transversality," 16.

This is where his comparative approach becomes edgy, becomes critical in a contemporary theoretical sense. By "hegemonic presuppositions," Navigante, after all, means Euro-American assumptions about the superiority of Western culture, the necessity and goodness of Christian mission, and the ultimate victory of neoliberal capitalism, Western technology, and, of course, Western science.

The poet-philosopher, I should add, also expresses collegial doubts about other aspects of my thought, particularly around what he perceives to be a relative lack of multiplicity and the mystical or apophatic dimensions of religious experience and expression that I do in fact tend to emphasize and out of which I try to theorize "religion." His critical appreciation and poetic vision (really, a kind of poetic-spiritual orientation) caught my ear, and my heart. I wanted to learn more, to see something of what he was seeing, to say something of what he was saying. Hence this essay.

AN AMERICAN POETICS

I am not a European. I am an American who grew up in the heart of the U.S. in what is generally called the Midwest. I come from simple people – farmers and small business owners – with not the slightest inkling of what my learned European colleagues often take for granted, that is, the history of European esotericism and Continental philosophy.

I think this matters. I generally do not read German, French, and English philosophical texts (although my library is filled with them – particularly Nietzsche, Freud, and Jung). I think these thinkers are too often profoundly Eurocentric. I think Immanuel Kant, for example, was simply mistaken. The Kantian claim about the "limits of reason" is no doubt well thought out in those big books on my shelf, but I doubt very much that any of this particular aspect of his thought is based on altered states, which often goes entirely beyond what can be thought with words and reasons, anyway. Historical individuals in fact claim to know reality as it is all the time. Maybe they are mistaken. Maybe they are not. That is an open question for me, not a philosophical certainty. We also know that Kant was deceptive in print when it came to experiences that could not be slotted into his philosophy. Basically, Immanuel Kant lied.[6]

I am interested in a new mode of poetics*, not a set of rationalities that produced most of our problems in the first place: convincing us that we are individuals and set apart from one another.*

Perhaps most seriously of all for me – and this, I realize, is more of a rhetorical argument, not exactly a philosophical one – I also think that we are losing the day, losing the public conversation, certainly in the States, precisely because of these philosophies and their inaccessible languages and ideas. Too often when someone cites a European philosopher, I sigh, probably too loudly. I sigh not because I do not understand what is being said (I have usually read the philosopher in question), but because I want us to talk to people who speak common English, not turn them away with technical terms and languages they cannot speak and will never understand, much less speak.

This is the deeper reason for my constant focus on American counterculture and later popular culture, on film and television, and modes of learning that are accessible to nearly everyone. I understand perfectly well that this is my historical context. It is also, by the way, the historical context for the comparative study of religion in the States, which also began in the 1960s. "It is not about colonialism, it is about counterculture," as I crystallize the idea. I think this rhetorical matter matters, a great deal. I am very concerned about translation and

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6 Immanuel Kant, *Kant on Swedenborg: Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, ed. by Gregory R. Johnson (West Chester 2003).

communication. To put the terms in a more literary mode, I am interested in *a new mode of poetics*, not a set of rationalities that produced most of our problems in the first place: convincing us that we are individuals and set apart from one another, that nature or matter is "dead," that there is nothing after we die, that life is basically meaningless and without purpose, that all spiritual experiences are "hallucinations," and so on. Navigante's summary of non-Western worldviews hits home:

> They don't unify meaning towards the homogenous superordinate that characterized modern rationality in the West. They don't define nature as a self-contained sphere of inanimate objects, nor do they consider that human beings are the only entities endowed with interiority; they don't think that events are better explained by their causes, nor do they experience time as something we (as material bodies) merely occupy; they don't possess universal truths to be disseminated, nor do they think the earth obliterates the dead. Judged from our own world-configuration, they push us to renounce many taken-for-granted assumptions about reality and relations.[7]

Here is the "gate toward new epistemological and ontological challenges that Western culture should assume instead of clinging to outdated (and counter-productive) strategies of survival."[8]

The language is itself resonant with European and philosophical meanings. I really do care about these terms. I was trained in a discipline that was European to the core and was called, in English now, the History of Religions (in German it is known as *Religionswissenschaft*). But this same European tradition taught me to read and admire *Asian* philosophers and scriptural texts, particularly of a Hindu and Buddhist persuasion, but also of a Daoist and Jain lineage. Put bluntly, my intellectual and religious heroes are not white. I also wrote my dissertation on Kālī, the Black One, in northeast India. I was even possessed by Her. And I mean that. I have written about that, probably too much.

And I was hardly alone. The entire History of Religions school was aimed, at the outset in the early 1960s (just before the counterculture broke), to move us past what its Romanian-American founder, Mircea Eliade, knew as a profound and disturbing Eurocentrism. Eliade described himself as a pagan trying to be a Christian that is, as someone who was drawn existentially and intellectually to non-Christian forms of religion. He also very much wanted a "new humanism." And he was looking for the beginnings of such a vision in India (he wrote his dissertation and early book on yoga and knew his own altered states beyond space and time through its practice), the indigenous shamanic traditions of the world (hence the first major book on shamanism, in 1951, no less), and in what he would call "magic," "witchcraft," and "occultism" (words that were all in the title of a late book of his).[9] The American haters would burn a cross on his yard near the university for the latter phrase. The enflamed symbol is rife with racist histories in the States.

What am I trying to say? That I think and write in a tradition that has been "transversal" for as long as it has been around, for over six decades now. And this history of religions has its roots in other European and American traditions that go further back still (to nineteenth-century Theosophy and Spiritualism, Victorian and American psychical research, and Eranos).

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7 Navigante, "Transversality," 11.

8 Navigante, "Transversality," 11.

9 These books were, in chronological order: Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1933); *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951); and *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

I have taught an introductory course on the comparative study of religion for decades. I genuinely believe in comparison, and I use neither word ("believe" or "comparison") lightly. I will explain why.

I have taught the comparative study of religion to a large audience at my home institution, Rice University in Houston, Texas, for a little over a decade and a half (from 2008 to 2024). I taught a version of a similar course at my previous institution for nine years (from 1993 to 2002), a small liberal arts college in western Pennsylvania, Westminster College. I have also been working in the field of the history of religions since 1993. So, I have been working in the discipline for over three decades now, about whose pedagogy and implications I have written a great deal.[10] I am getting old. Or mature. Or something.

At Westminster College, we called the course "Understanding Religious Experience and Expression." Here at Rice we call it simply "RELI 101"--not very eloquent but I suppose useful enough. The course has something of a reputation or, if you want to be grand about it, lore. For one thing, it is big, really big by Rice standards. It attracted up to 275 students in its heyday, before the university initiated its first year writing intensive requirements, which instantly reduced the enrollment to around 100 or so (since the required seminars grabbed much of the humanities credit that was in fact driving the large number for RELI 101). That is where the numbers hover now--between 80 and 100.

The general demographics of the two institutions are also worth describing. Even though Westminster College was Presbyterian in its history and administrative spirit, most of our students, at least in the 1990s, were women who came from Roman Catholic families in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. We had a hard time recruiting male students. I think our numbers were up to something like 64:36 in terms of the gender norms of the time. Not quite 2:1, but close. I should add that the gender and cultural make-up of the course at Rice is completely different. The classroom attendance looks like the U.N., that is, it is very much a global community consisting of individuals from dozens of cultures and ethnicities. Most of the students are STEM-oriented, that is, come to us from the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields. The total undergraduate body is gendered in equitable and now openly transgendered ways.

About the same time that I took up RELI 101 at Rice from my colleague William B. Parsons, who had invented and grew it with the department's alumna Jill Carroll, I was contacted by an editor at Wiley-Blackwell in Oxford named Rebecca Harkin. Rebecca asked me to consider

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10 It turns out that I have been writing about pedagogy and the classroom for some time. These interwoven themes run like red threads through my life. See, for example, Jeffrey J. Kripal, "The Dream of Scholarship: Some Notes on the Historian of Mysticism as a Dreaming Creative," in Kelly Bulkeley, ed., *Dreams and Dreaming: A Reader in Religious Studies, Anthropology, History, and Psychology* (New York 2001); "Teaching Hindu Tantrism With Freud: Psychoanalysis as Critical Theory and Mystical Technique," for Diane Jonte-Pace, ed., *Teaching Freud in Religious Studies* (New York 2003); "Comparative Mystics: Scholars as Gnostic Diplomats," in Jeffrey M. Perl, ed., *Talking Peace with Gods, Symposium on the Reconciliation of Worldviews*, Part 1, *Common Knowledge*, 10:3 (Fall 2004); "Liminal Pedagogy: The Liberal Arts and the Transforming Ritual of Religious Studies," in James Boyd White, ed., *How Should We Talk About Religion? Perspectives, Contexts, Particularities* (South Bend 2006); William B. Parsons and Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Psychology and Religion at Rice University: A Brief History," *Journal of Pastoral Psychology* 59:1 (2010); "Secrets in the Seats: The Erotic, the Paranormal, and the Free Spirit," for William B. Parsons, ed., *Teaching Mysticism* (New York 2011); "Understanding the Nature of Our Offense: A Dialogue on the Twenty-First Century Study of Religion for Use in the Classroom," co-written with Laurie Patton, for Brian K. Pennington and Amir Hussain, eds., *Teaching Religion and Violence* (New York 2012); "'Comparison Gets You Nowhere!' The Comparative Study of Religion and the Spiritual But Not Religious," in William B. Parsons, ed., *Being Spiritual But Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)* (New York 2020); "Humanism and Higher Education," in Anthony B. Pinn, *Oxford Handbook of Humanism* (New York 2021); and "Comparing Religions in Public: Rural America, Evangelicals, and the Prophetic Function of the Humanities," in William David Hart, ed., *Educating Humanists: The Challenge of Sustaining Communities in the Contemporary Era* (Switzerland 2022).

writing a textbook on the comparative study of religion. "No way," I answered in so many emailish words. "The world has too many textbooks on the world religions. We don't need another." And I thought that was that: one less thing to do. But Rebecca insisted and went further. "No, I want you to write what you want to write. I want you to come up with something different." Well, *that* was interesting. And very persuasive as we continued to correspond. I agreed to proceed. So we did.

What I was thinking when I said "Yes" to Rebecca was Westminster College and an exchange I had there with another colleague, Bryan Rennie (an expert on Mircea Eliade). Bryan and I were struggling over how to teach "Understanding Religious Experience and Expression." There were two usual ways to teach this particular class.

The first way, probably the most common, was the "world religions" model: the class goes through the big religions (usually five or six in number, depending upon one's time and intellectual tastes) and describes them as well as one can, basically leaving all the obvious comparative questions in the students' heads in a kind of unaddressed box, questions like, "And why do religions all over the world give different, or similar, answers to the same questions?" Or "And why exactly do we keep finding stories of fathers killing sons?" Or "And where are the daughters?"

The second way to teach the introductory course is less common, perhaps *way* less common. It is "thematic." One goes through the different big themes--myth, ritual, sacrifice, initiation, authority, institution, salvation, ecstatic experience, ultimate reality, and so on--and sees how the different religions answer or express these themes. One also introduces the general themes of critical theory: society, sexuality and gender, race, class, colonialism, and so on. There is not a severe limit on how many religions one can handle, since one is not really handling any. One is treating transcultural themes and critical ideas, not religions or civilizations.

It was the late 1990s. I was frustrated. I was also growing suspicious that the world religions model encouraged and sustained religious identity in ways I was finding increasingly troubling. Basically, the course was encouraging the question: "And with which box do I identify?" As if human identity is a simple thing, even within a culture or tradition (or a single psyche), that can be put in a box, or a two-week conversation. Geopolitical events of ominous scope, most all involving religious identity, the specter of "terrorism," and war were on the horizon. I remember 9/11 well. I was sitting in a Westminster classroom, watching the falling towers in a "smart-classroom," broadcast on a gigantic screen on the wall. Religious identity itself was in question.

Every religion is little more than a social practice, institutional authority, or emotional fix.

Not that the thematic approach was any better. I had tried out this approach in the classroom, too. Honestly, it seemed too scatter-shot and disorganized. Comparative patterns and critical theories were both inadequate for an introductory course. One could claim a certain comparative confusion and theoretical knowledge, but not much more. Or so was my conclusion.

I knew we only had four months and a single class for most of the human beings with whom we worked every week. Perhaps most seriously, I had grown existentially disillusioned with the introductory class itself. My joke was that we spent the entire fall teaching young people that every religion is little more than a social practice, institutional authority, or emotional fix. We reduced everything to basic mush, and then we sent them home for Christmas. I could well guess where that one was going – to a kind of confusion that would lead to a spiritual tailspin or a forced forgetting. Probably mostly the latter. This was nihilism on display, as a college course on less. It all disgusted me.

Then Bryan suggested we try something else: that we engage the existential issues more directly (the comparative questions were intense and obvious) and try to form the course

around an "initiation" cycle. He was referencing the anthropologist Victor Turner and his well-known tripartite division of the initiatory cycle into three basic stages: a pre-initiation identity, a middle or "liminal" phase in which that identity is dissolved or symbolically killed, and a post-initiation phase in which a new identity can be formed. Turner, and before him Arnold van Gennep, had shown that such an initiatory cycle appears around the world. It is a strong transcultural ritual pattern, if not a universal one (I had learned never to utter that word, rather like the V-name in *Harry Potter* – but there it was regardless, like Lord Voldemort himself).

I liked Bryan's suggestion, as it gave us a way of addressing the existential questions of the students and not "bracketing" them away in some kind of forbidden space that they could only explore back in their dorms (not very well) or suppress entirely, as their teachers were teaching them to do. The pedagogical key, it turned out, was the last phase--given the students a way to "put the pieces back together again." You could tell the students that the course was going to help them define their belief systems in part one (it was) and then take their worlds apart (we did), but as long as you gave them space and time to reconfigure, even tentatively, this world at the end of the semester, they were good. So was the course. I was happy.

This is what I planned, more or less, for Rebecca and Wiley-Blackwell: a three-part textbook that dealt with the existential questions of comparison, forthrightly and complexly, refusing to deny the costs *or* the promises of comparison. I also planned to do the writing with my doctoral students. I just did not know enough about, well, everything. Accordingly, to prepare for the writing and co-writing, I taught a year-long graduate seminar for the Humanities Research Center on "Comparison in Theory and Practice" in 2009. Doctoral students from Anthropology, History, and English inspired me, defined my voice. I chose three to help me with the book: Ata Anzali, who would write the sections on Islam; Andrea R. Jain, who would write the sections on Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism; and Erin Prophet, who would write the sections on new religious movements.

What I eventually conceived for Rebecca was a way of backgrounding the religions themselves and foregrounding the comparative practice itself. I worked with the tripartite model of initiation that Bryan had suggested: defining one's world, absolving or dissolving one's world, and reconstituting one's new post-initiatory world. It was all about existential involvement, questions that were also quests. It was about life. This in turn gave me a way to use the class as a kind of philosophical exercise or spiritual encounter. No more hiding. No more denying.

The textbook came out in 2014 as *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms*. The textbook was re-released ten years later as *Comparing Religions: The Study of Us that Changes Us* (2024), now with an ever greater emphasis on altered states as the historical origins of comparison and a focus on Gloria Anzáldua and her *la facultad*, a "mixed" (*mestiza*) practice or "*mestiza* consciousness" that arises on the borders, in between peoples, and tries to think toward some common or shared humanity, one that is evolving through psychical or paranormal experiences that erupt particularly in individuals who have been traumatized because of these "borderlands." Anzaldúa, it turns out, knew these altered states, this mixed form of consciousness, and these paranormal awakenings intimately and energetically. She, too, was quite literally possessed by the spirits.[11]

There was a fourth doctoral student in the mix now, an expert on indigenous religions and the theoretical questions that they invoke for the comparativist, Stefan Sanchez. It was Sanchez who actually introduced me to the work of Anzaldúa.

Both subtitles are important. I meant by "Coming to Terms" both senses of the English phrase, that is, getting to know the general categories of the study of religion, but also, and more fundamentally coming to terms in an existential sense with the act of comparison. By "The Study of Us that Changes Us" I meant to refer to the existential or spiritual components

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11 See my discussion of Gloria Anzaldúa, her queer or lesbian postcolonial criticism, and her "mixed" paranormal comparativism in *The Superhumanities*, 190-198.

of comparison. I meant a change so deep that one is not really aware of it, until it is too late. I often joke that such a comparative faculty is a bit like the Trojan Horse. Once it is in the gates, weird people start jumping out, and it is too late.

I have learned a great deal writing the different versions and watching how people react to the first (I have not yet taught the second). A few memories stick in my mind. One was a close friend and colleague who asked me one day where the chapter on Judaism is. I am not sure what I said to her, but there is no chapter on Judaism, or Christianity, or Islam, or Hinduism, or anything else. That is kind of the point. The religions, and so religious identity, are called into question as stable essences or things.

I also remember well the general postmodern conviction that meta-narratives are somehow out; that all such grand ideas are hegemonic and colonizing; and that one cannot do comparison anyway, because rigorous thought is, supposedly, only about difference, locality, and history. Sameness is always a bad thing. Or so the story goes. As my words suggest, I confess I always found these convictions to function more like dogmas, as if Martin Heidegger and Michel Foucault had become infallible gods. I kept asking my colleagues, "And why are your graduate mentors infallible?"

The postmodern ideas were extremely helpful, and I use them all the time, but they are often simply inadequate, not true enough, inadequate. For example, I could find no model of social justice that did not presume both sameness and difference. And I could not deny that some kinds of religious experience really do look alike across cultures and times. I am thinking of mystical experience, to name just one example (and there is an immense critical literature there). But I am also thinking of divination rituals and precognition, which happen everywhere and always, not just to some peoples in some cultures. One can always historicize the content of this or that mythology and ritual system, of course, but one can hardly deny that cultures always mythologize or tell stories and then act out those stories in daily ritual and life. Content is clearly relative. Function is clearly not. Nor are the human abilities.

I also discovered that colleagues continued to publish books on comparison throughout the 1990s and into the millennium, regardless of elite academics telling us that they could not do it. It was just a bit funny. On one level, the academy said over and over again, "You cannot do this." Then it just went ahead and did it, not because it is bad, but because it is good and necessary, and, well, how the human brain works. Evolutionary biology, for example, would not be, if it were not for comparison: Darwin compared this wing to that wing, this leg to that leg. Nor would we know a thing about ecology or, for that matter, race, gender, and sexuality. Locating parts in a whole, acknowledging sameness as well as difference, is foundational to pretty much all of our critical theories, whether they foreground this fact or not. These are theoretical points, however. Most of all, I came to a practical and pedagogical conclusion, which I captured in a kind of soundbite that went like this: "If you are not going to do comparison, then others will, and they will do it badly." I think such advice has been borne out over and over again. We better well do comparison with all the critical theories at our disposal, but also realize that there is a shared and common world beyond our theories of which our students are expressions and in which they live their daily lives. These worlds have moral, social, and political consequences, moreover. They give life. And they end life. If we will not address what we share, who we are, in a global comparative fashion, other people will do this instead, and intellectuals will inevitably not like what they say.

One can always historicize the content of this or that mythology and ritual system, of course, but one can hardly deny that cultures always mythologize or tell stories and then act out those stories in daily ritual and life.

The biblical questions in particular are intense. Because I was myself trained early on in biblical studies and had read the Bible many times, I found these texts (and the assumptions of my Christian students) to be powerful ways to show how comparison works, or at least can work. My joke at Westminster was that I could say that the Buddha was really pudgy and green

(I was thinking of those Chinese jade statues), and few would flinch. There were no Buddhists in my classrooms, after all. But if I said that the historical Jesus had little to do with contemporary conceptions of Christ, that he counseled his closest disciples to hate their mothers and fathers and castrate themselves (the gospels have him saying exactly those things), or that he was a paranormal prodigy (he was), all hell would break loose.

So I said these things, over and over again. I also say them in the textbook. I want to offend. People need to be provoked out of their comfort zone, out of their very identity. Otherwise, they will not move. They will not change.

THE ONE AND THE MANY

What I hear and read Adrián Navigante doing is writing like a gifted poet and thinking like a nuanced postmodern philosopher, emphasizing multiplicity, questioning unity as totalizing, and criticizing the Western Christian project that understood itself and its missioning/colonizing role as a truth-system that should be hegemonic or all-defining for everyone everywhere. I understand that the latter history is what is partly behind the contemporary criticism of meta-narratives and ontological truth claims.

Such an all-embracing exclusivism, of course, is also what comparison, done with enough nuance and sophistication anyway, is poised against, if in, well, multiple ways. I hesitate somewhat, since exclusivism is also a comparative practice (that is, it has an answer for why human beings are so religiously different – people outside the exclusive truth claim are just mistaken), but also because most religious systems are exclusive in some way or other, even if they do not act on this exclusivism, as European Christianity and many forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism, to name the most obvious, clearly did. I understand that European intellectuals are responding to their own histories, but what of the imperial and colonial histories of other cultures and times in Asia, the Americas, and the Middle East? What of the exclusive nature of religious truth claims in general? As I joke in the textbook, the Buddha did not come to teach that only people in north India did not have souls or could know the liberation of emptiness. He taught that everyone could, from China to California and beyond. The Buddhist teaching on the non-existence of the soul and the impermanence of all things is not a "local" thing. It is not a cultural "difference." It is a normative truth statement applicable everywhere.

Or to return closer to home, my home anyway, when my friend and co-writer Elizabeth Krohn was struck by lightning in her Jewish synagogue parking lot in 1988 and returned with the stunned experience that "God is unconditional love," she did not mean the phrase in any local, historical, or Jewish way. She meant it as true for everyone for all time. She was speaking of the ultimate nature of reality, not for this or that religious tradition or community.[12] I employ these examples because they work well to demonstrate just how modern and relative the present commitments to difference and historicism really are. They themselves are relative and local, very recent, actually. To think otherwise is to not think historically in as radical a fashion as is possible (since even this historicism is historical--the snake bites its own tail). It is also to miss what is at stake in truly radical comparison--the nature of reality itself.

This is not to say that comparison done well is without a critical edge. Indeed, transversality is much like comparison as I encourage the orientation in the textbook and classroom, a middle space that does not sign its name to this or that culture, belief system, or ritual practice, that sits "in-between." It might take part in such a religious construction or faith community, but it also recognizes that each and every culture or practice is a social construction and has

12 See Elizabeth G. Krohn and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Changed in a Flash: One Woman's Near-Death Experience and Why a Scholar Thinks It Empowers Us All* (Berkeley 2018).

multiple histories. It also knows about and practices critical theory from Émile Durkheim, Edmund Husserl, and Gloria Anzaldúa to Friedrich Nietzsche, Mary Douglass, Amitav Ghosh, and Edward Said. It knows more than a little about philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis, sociology, and evolutionary cognitive psychology.

I struggle with the One and the Many, with unity and plurality, and I suspect that every "balance" is in fact a "compromise," an emphasizing of this or that when both capture and express something of the truth of things. Hence I am comfortable with the postmodern critique as a critique (and not as an absolute truth-claim). I also know that other intellectuals go back and forth, including and especially William James, who wrote what is still perhaps the most oft-read book in the comparative study of religion – *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901). I take heart in the fact that James also spoke of the paradoxical presence of both monism and pluralism late in his life. He could not decide between them, but he could affirm both. And he did.

I have also directed dissertations that land on conclusions that are plural and singular at the same time. One of the most recent, on a transcultural history of the subtle body, ended with a "somatic pluralism" modeled on the "multi-naturalism" of Eduardo Viveiros Castro but also, I think, going beyond it in ontological reach and implication. The dissertation-become-book, after all, argues that the subtle body, which is also the human body, is genuinely multiple and cannot be construed as singular or monolithic. There is no single map or model of the subtle body because there is no single subtle body.[13]

THINKING AFTER RELIGION

I coined an expression in *How to Think Impossibly*: to think-with.[14] It is admittedly a minor sort of coinage, but still. I added the hyphen to emphasize that when I think-with an experiencer, I am taking the experience seriously, which is to say that I think the experiencer is knowing something of reality as such, if always coded in the visionary symbolism of the place and time. I am not "bracketing out" the ontological shock of the experience. I am not reducing it or explaining it in some philosophical system that I happen to think is true. But neither am I asserting it in any kind of literal way. I am neither debunking nor believing. I am doing something different. I am also assuming that there is critical theory embedded in the experience, waiting to be drawn out in conversation and dialogue. Hence the hyphenated phrase.

I want to use another expression here to get at what I think the transversal orientation is about. I want to write of "thinking after" different religious worldviews. I mean the expression in both senses of the English term: "after" implies both a keen listening that tracks what is being said and done as faithfully as one can, but also an abandoning or letting go. I intend both senses. And I use the adverb "faithfully" intentionally here, as there is something of the epistemology of belief in what I am trying to say. I do not generally like the word "belief," but I also recognize that belief is a tricky thing. It may well be necessary to result in particular religious effects. This is how much religion works, after all: one fakes it until one makes it. Moreover, a particular belief may well be "true" in some cases, in the sense that there are certain things that we do not directly know, and maybe cannot know, but are nevertheless the case. And I say this in a completely non-egalitarian fashion and count myself among those who cannot know, who must "believe."

Let me give you two quick examples.

Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche wrote a good deal about the impossible, how individuals

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13 Simon Cox, *The Subtle Body: A Genealogy* (New York 2021).

14 See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *How to Think Impossibly: About Souls, UFOs, Time, Belief, and Everything Else* (Chicago 2024). This essay is an extension of that book.

who had not known directly what he knew could not know what he knew and so would consider it "impossible." One of his many metaphors was how he walks about on a floor above the rest of us. Individuals on the floor below, on my floor down here, put stuff between their reality and his so as to silence the sound of his steps and give the illusion that theirs is the only floor and the true reality. But it is simply not the case.

I believe Nietzsche in the sense that (a) I do think he wrote and spoke out of a form of direct knowledge that (b) I do not possess and cannot possess. I do not, for example, have direct access to the eternal recurrence of the same or the coming future human or Superman (*Übermensch*). But I am convinced he did. He knew both truths. Accordingly, he spoke of them endlessly, including poetically and mythically (in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) in the last years of his life. I do not imagine for a moment that I have to had those experiences to accept those truths. I accept that Nietzsche did know and did so experience, which means that I "believe" him.

Edwin Abbott is another example. Abbott was a theological author who wrote almost 50 books, including the little but deeply influential *Flatland*. The little "romance" imagines what a two-dimensional entity must think, or not think, about a three-dimensional world that intervenes from "above" it. Pretty much nothing. The two-dimensional being *cannot* imagine or think such an impossibility. But "belief" is perfectly appropriate. The two-dimensional being is truly justified to "believe" in the reality of the three-dimensional world, since it is so.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I understand, then, the postmodern critique of meta-narratives and the One. I just do not accept the critique *in toto*, not because I do not think there is "an irrational fear of (heterogenous) multiplicity lying behind those constructs."[15] Of course, there is. My suspicions of the suspicion run deeper into the historical fact of pluralism again. After all, the experiences of and subsequent convictions in the One are not just behind modernity, Christian theology and mission, European colonialism, and Marxist or Hegelian thought. Such experiences and knowledges are also behind much of pagan or Neoplatonic philosophy (I mean, they even called it "the One"). Or is this the source of the idea that Platonism, this assumed separation of immanence and transcendence, this "metaphysics," is itself the deepest problem of the West?

So why is the same experienced separation apparent pretty much everywhere we look? What about philosophical thought in India, China, and Asia in general? Or the fact that the plants of the Amazonian basin or of the deserts of the Americas work with people from all over the world, if yes, of course, in very different ways. Again, it is a both-and, not an either-or. I simply want to affirm that similarity along with the differences, not pick one or the other. And where exactly do we stop? Do we reject particular beliefs because they cannot be slotted into what a few European intellectuals claimed in the last few centuries? I am not trying to be European or Christian here. I am observing what I hope is a much bigger chunk of the history of religions. One can reject such an emphasis on human unity, of course, but only by slicing off much of the planet.

Human beings experience the same things everywhere and always, 'accidentally'. That is because we share a common world, the same planet and the same ecosystem, which is not any of our cultures, rituals, or mythologies but that expresses them all.

This is why, when I wrote *The Superhumanities*, I spent so much time on ancient Hermetism, on Islamic thinkers in India, and invoked a modern Hindu guru as one of the exemplars of the method I was proposing: Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897-1981). The historical precedents, or realizations, of the superhumanities as comparative method are in actual fact

15 Navigante, 10.

everywhere and are in no way European or white.[16] This is also why I located and owned the apophatic nature of my own comparative thought and elsewhere wrote of an "accidental perennialism."[17] I do not think the religions are pointing to such a mystical unity, or that they intend this in any kind of unconscious or implicit way. Indeed, the religions often get in the way of or actively prevent such a realization. But I do think that human beings experience the same things everywhere and always, "accidentally." That is because we share a common world, the same planet and the same ecosystem, which is not any of our cultures, rituals, or mythologies but that expresses them all. Can we speak and write of something of that now? Can we practice it? •

16 Kripal, *The Superhumanites*, 68-73. See all of chapter 1 for the historical precedents.

17 See Kripal, *The Superhumanites*, chapter 3. See also Jeffrey J. Kripal, "The Future of the Human(ities): Mystical Literature, Paranormal Phenomena, and the Politics of Knowledge," for Edward F. Kelly and Paul Marshall, eds., *Consciousness Unbound: Liberating Mind from the Tyranny of Materialism* (Lanham, Maryland 2021).

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"AVIS, JASMIN VARNĀ NA Ā AST, DADARKA AKVAMS" MOUNTED INDO-EUROPEAN ARMY

In this essay, Marcello Barison analyzes the symbolic centrality of the horse in the Indo-European narrative by referring not only to the connection of the animal with the military function usually ascribed to it but also to its relevance in the spheres of religious activities and productive labor. The motive of the horse is taken as a transhistorical mythologem, the dynamics of which structures different cultural configurations and triggers a deep philosophical reflection on questions like existence, guilt and sacrifice, as well as the meaning, the scope and the destiny of symbols in human history.

The aśvamedha *is everything.*
Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa

THEME

"*Avis, jasmin varnā na ā ast, dadarka akvams* [...]" – "[Ein] schaf, [auf] welchem wolle nicht war (ein geschorenes schaf) sah rosse [...]" – "A shorn sheep saw horses [...]": so begins the 'ancient fable' invented by August Schleicher (1868), corrected by Hermann Hirt (1939) in "*Owis, jesmin wьlənā ne ēst, dedork'e ek'wons* [....]" and then again revised by Lehmann and Zgusta in '79: "*Gʷərēi owis, kʷesjo wḷ̥hnā ne ēst, ekʹwōns espeḱet* [...]."[1]

The first Indo-European word, though wholly hypothetical, tells of a sheep and three horses: one pulls the chariot, the second carries a large load, and the third a man. Each of these terms—the sheep therefore the farming, the chariot as a technology of warfare and transportation, the horse as an animal at once military and symbolic—is a milestone element in Indo-European culture. To articulate a reflection on even this first line of our civilization's narrative would allow us to tackle some decisive features of its simultaneously metaphysical and historical-political framework.

That the first line may then turn out to be essential for an understanding of even the last one, which is still far from being written, may apply principally to the subtle suggestion we intend to put in the ear of the reader, disquieted—but perhaps also legitimized—by the fact that in a Ridley Scott film that nevertheless has the merit of combining dawn and futurism, the algid Promethean android played by an impassive Fassbender, instead of proposing a variant of the abused refrain "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe...," with a fantasy-philological gesture starts educating a computer straight off with the proto-Indo-European tale of the sheep, the chariot and the horses.

Here we will leave the sheep aside, to the chariot we will return later, while in the meantime, in the preliminary warm-up phase, we will interrogate the horse to ask what its role is in defining the Indo-European paradigm. Will this be done to sound out the 'primordial', or "zu Gunsten einer kommenden Zeit"—"for the sake of a time to come"?[2] It is feared that this question will only be answered by archaeologists for whom we too will sooner or later become an indecipherable relic of the past.

Let us finally premise, to set the record straight as of now, that we will conclude in India with the Sun Temple of Konark, mentioning its colossal chariot structure drawn by the seven horses of Sūrya as an example of *Nachleben*, i.e., literally, of afterlife—configuring re-emergence

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1 The 'fable' first appeared in A. Schleicher, *Eine Fabel in indogermanischer Sprache*, in "Beiträge zur vergleichenden Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete der arischen, celtischen und slawischen Sprachen," hrsg. von A. Kuhn und A. Schleicher, 5. Bd. (1868), pp. 206-208. A discussion of it within the question of how and whether it is actually possible to reconstruct a common Indo-European source language is conducted in the chapter *Cómo podemos conocer su lengua* in F. Villar, *Los indoeuropeos y los orígenes de Europa. Lenguaje e historia*, Gredos, Madrid 1996², pp. 167 ff. For an accurate reconstruction of the different versions of the 'fable', see the entry *Schleicher's Tale* in the monumental D. Q. Adams, J. P. Mallory (ed. by), *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture*, Fitzroy Dearborn, Chicago 1997, pp. 500-503. After the aforementioned Lehmann and Zgusta, many in recent years have tried their hand at reformulating the 'fable': Dank (1986), Adams (1997), Lühr (2008), Voyles and Barrack (2009), Kortlandt (2007 and 2010), Melchert (2009 and 2014), Byrd (2014). It seems safe to say that the exercise on variations of the fable has become a literary genre in its own right: hypothetical variations on an unattainable beginning.

2 F. Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen. Zweites Stück: Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe* (15 Bde.), hrsg. von G. Colli e M. Montinari, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1999, *Die Geburt der Tragödie. Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, I, p. 247; my translation.

in expressed form—of the *mythomorphism* of the horse, saying that we employ this term to define the iconographic *Nachleben* of a specific mythologem, thus uniting in one the 'Warburg-method' and Kerényi's fundamental insight. (Allowing for a somewhat allusive simplification, one could summarize the operation with the following 'equation': *Morphism = Pathosformel – Pathos.*)

As the Hungarian scholar explains in his *Prolegomena*, the becoming of mythical forms is equated with "[...] eine alte, überlieferte Stoffmasse, enthalten in bekannten und doch nicht jede weitere Gestaltung ausschließenden Erzählungen [...]".[3] He then resorts to the term *mythologem* to refer to such a mass, concluding that "die Mythologie ist die Bewegung dieser Materie: etwas Festes und zugleich doch Bewegliches, Stoffliches und doch nicht Statisches, sondern Verwandlungsfähiges".[4] The mythologem of the horse, we shall see, acts at different levels and in different historical epochs of the development of the Indo-European paradigm. Whenever it appears, it carries a mythosymbolic content composed of a certain 'amount' of mythic material. The form in which this material recurs, however, while it varies from time to time, is likewise always a trans-formed form of the same icon, that, precisely, of the horse. In other words: the same mythical material, unitary as to the mythologem, must reappear in a different form by transferring its own 'cultural' survival into the image. What we call *mythomorphism* will thus be nothing more than the surviving configuration by means of which the same mythologem resurfaces, re-presenting itself historically as an image.

Mythomorphism will be nothing more than the surviving configuration by means of which the mythologem of the horse resurfaces, re-presenting itself historically in image.

Let us then apply what has been said about the mythomorphism of the horse.

TRIFUNCTIONAL TRANSVERSALITY OF THE HORSE

We will start with a page by Harald Haarmann, who in his *Auf den Spuren der Indoeuropäer* summarizes with particular poignancy and conciseness the famous tripartite scheme elaborated by Georges Dumézil:

- sovereignty, order, and leadership due by right (personified by a priestly-type upper class, whose representatives enjoy both religious-ritual and legal or jurisdictional authority). The deities paired with this social stratum mostly appear in pairs and represent the duality: religious authority/legal order (for example, the Indian pair formed by the gods Váruṇa and Mithras, or the Norse deities Odin and Týr). "In the intermediate Vedic period, the horse was the preferred animal in the most important ritual sacrifices of kings."[5] [...].
- protection of the community (represented by an aristocratic warrior class). The training of warriors responded to the need to defend the community from external aggressions [...] The polarity of the two defensive and aggressive aspects in the 'mission' of a military *élite* is reflected in the functions of the Indo-European gods of war (Indra, Mars, Thor). Horses and bulls were offered in sacrifice to the war gods;
- productivity and protection of sources of economic subsistence (entrusted to shepherds and farmers). In mythology this social category is related to twin deities of both sexes, in

3 "[...] An ancient mass of material transmitted in well-known tales that nevertheless do not exclude any further shaping" (C. G. Jung, K. Kerényi, *Einführung in das Wesen der Mythologie*, Gerstenberg Verlag, Hildesheim 1980, p. 11; my translation).

4 "Mythology is the movement of this matter: something solid and yet mobile, material and yet not static, but susceptible to transformations" (*ibid*, p. 11; my translation).

5 Here Haarmann quotes A. Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Script*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 158.

which a brother is associated with horses. In India, for example, there are the Ashvins, a pair of divine twins on horseback, together with their sister Sarasvatī. They can be compared to the Greek Dioscuri, the twins Castor and Pollux with their sister Helen, who in some traditions were born from a single twin egg. Similarly, in Norse mythology appear the twins Freia and Freyr with their respective father Nyörðr; Freyr and Nyörðr are both closely related to horses.[6]

Note at the outset (this is quite peculiar), that *only one animal* appears in the description of all three 'functions': the horse. Let us therefore proceed with a kind of 'sifting through' of the quoted text since each point retains on the surface that which is related to our 'leading animal'. Thus, the reformulation is somewhat deepened:

» Sovereignty is both religious and legal in order. The ruler is the supreme male priestly figure and the investiture that gives him power is theological in nature. Foundation and theological legality of royal power means: the ruler receives power by direct attribution/descendance from a supreme transcendent principle of solar/celestial character: Mithra/Varuṇa[7] (*idem* for its variations: Ahura (Mazdā) and Uranus). It is a paradigm destined to endure and recur until the more accomplished outcome of the Hobbesian "mortal God" and the 'solarness' of seventeenth-century absolutism. In the Vedic world, this theological-political plexus is celebrated through the most important of sacred rituals: the *aśvamedha*, the sacrifice of the horse, which thus embodies the symbolic center of royal power of Uranian emanation.

» The warrior function, Haarmann says, is also celebrated with the sacrificial offering of the horse (and the bull, another animal of eminent symbolic value, which we cannot dwell upon here, however). Not mentioned, but implied, is the role of the horse in defining Indo-European military technology, which has cavalry and the war chariot as two constituent elements. To introductively specify the military function of the horse suffice the statements with which Gimbutas characterizes the Neolithic Kurgan culture that emerged from the Volga Basin, which, "with the domesticated horse and lethal weapons," proceeded to invade ancient Europe. Its "basic peculiarities" were "patriarchy; patrilinearity; small-scale agriculture and animal husbandry, including the domestication of the horse not later than the 6th millennium; the eminent place of the horse in the cult; and, of great importance, armaments—bow and arrow, spear, and dagger)."[8]

» The 'third state' is that constituted by 'producers' and which, as is well known, finds its strictest formulation in the Platonic model of the *Republic.* Production is declined here in agricultural terms and refers, thus Haarmann, to the pairs of divine twins associated—which is for us decisive—with the horse. In what follows, we will not exhaust this track, which would call into question concepts of very wide scope, beginning with the fertility of the female figures associated with the twin pair. We therefore limit ourselves to noting the absolute centrality of the horse even at this level of the functional tripartition.

With a gesture of 'structural synthesis,' let us now try to summarize the three points just

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6 H. Haarmann, *Auf den Spuren der Indoeuropäer. Von den neolithischen Steppennomaden bis zu den frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich 2016, pp. 80-81; my translation.

7 Obvious reference is G. Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuṇa. Essai sur deux représentations indo-européennes de la souveraineté*, Gallimard, Paris 1948 (in the first version the text appears under the title *Ouranós-Váruṇa.* Étude de mythologie comparée indo-européenne, Adrien-Maisonneuve, Paris 1934). In the interplay of titles lies all the oscillation (for Iranian/Eurasian *medium*), between the Vedic world and the archaic Roman world, of the great French comparatist, on whose work, "monumental and solitary" (Lévi-Strauss) appropriately calibrated words are expressed by E. Montanari, *Presence of Dumézil*, in "Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica," Vol. XXIV, No. 3 (1986), pp. 169-174. For a more concise—but still highly articulate—approach, see the 'little paragraph' *Les grands dieux souverains védiques, Mitra et Varuṇa* in *Mythe et épopée I. L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens*, Gallimard, Paris 1986, pp. 147-149.

8 M. Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, Thames & Hudson, London 1989, Introduction, p. xx.

described by focusing only on the role that, in each of them, is fulfilled by the horse.

First function	Legitimacy and sacredness	Kings and priests	*Potestas/Imperium*	Horse as a symbol of sovereignty
Second function	Militarism	Warriors	*Bellum*	Horse as a military technique
Third function	Agriculture and manufacturing	Manufacturers	*Labor*	Horse as productive masculinity

The horse thus appears as an *element that cuts across all three functions*, which unequivocally demonstrates its symbolic centrality. If there is one animal figure capable of centralizing on itself the articulation of Indo-European ideology—theological-political, military and productive—this is undoubtedly the horse.

A clarification should be made, however, which concerns, even in reading the diagram, the relationship between the second and third functions and the role of the horse in this relationship. The ambiguity lies in the fact that its relationship to agricultural production is in many ways enigmatic and not unambiguously structured, as is the case with the ox. On the one hand, the horse appears linked to the 'spirit of grain', as in Celtic mythology—fundamental, in this regard, is the Goddess Epona, Goddess of horses and dispenser of fertility, all characters that connect her, however, to a cult of pre-Indo-European origin, where, to be precise, the horse is not yet enlisted in the military ranks.[9] On the other hand, the ambivalent role of the horse

9 MacKenzie Cook's seminal book devoted to Epona does not fail to point out this ambiguity punctually (see P. D. MacKenzie Cook, *Epona. Hidden Goddess of the Celts*, Avalonia, London 2016, p. 73 ff.). Starting from the fact that in the Celtic culture the horse as a military animal was introduced only very late ("Although the Celts did not learn to ride horses, and thus did not make it the central animal of their society and culture until the 8th century BC, it had been an important cult animal since the Bronze Age"), MacKenzie deduces, in our opinion correctly, the symbolic ambivalence of the Goddess: "The hidden dimensions of the term 'Horse Goddess' come from the fact that it can have two very different meanings. Perhaps the more obvious of these is that it suggests a goddess of horses: the 'Lady' concerned with their breeding, care and protection. The other evokes the 'Divine Mare'—the idea that Epona and the horse were intimately mingled in each other's essence, or that the horse was her special way of manifesting in the world [...] In this sense of the term 'Horse Goddess', even the mare-and-foal images may have been ambiguous: conveying the Lady's association with the domestication, fertility and protection of horses and having a special concern with the craft of horse-breeding. / As Lady and Rider, Epona was more than just the protectress of horses. She also protected mounted Celtic warriors and the men of the Roman cavalry who adopted her. An inscription to Epona from a riding instructor suggests that the Celtic 'Lady of the Horse' also personified equestrian skill and mastery." Demeter herself, just to mention an eminent case, is not entirely unrelated to the first *côté* of the reported ambiguity, when, in order to escape Poseidon, she assumes the guise of horse-Goddess. In some cults, precisely recorded by Barbara Walker, she is in fact worshipped as Aganippe, manifesting herself in the form of a winged black horse: "Some of the Destroyer's other, earlier names were Melaina, the Black One; Demeter Chthonia, the Subterranean One; or The Avenger (Erinys). Her black-robed, mare-headed idol, her mane entwined with Gorgon snakes, appeared in one of her oldest cave-shrines, Mavrospelya, Black Cave, in Phigalia (southwest Arcadia). She carried a dolphin and a dove, symbols of womb and yoni. Like the devouring death-goddess everywhere, she was once a cannibal [...] The legendary medieval Night-Mare—an equine Fury who tormented sinners in their sleep—was based on ancient images of Mare-headed Demeter" (B. G. Walker, *The Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1983, p. 219). It would be interesting to probe in depth the historical-symbolic implications of these findings, for everything suggests transitional figures: Demeter is a fertility figure who predates the formed Indo-European *pantheon*. In order to survive in it, her figure is delegitimized, associating her with the chthonic dimension of subterranean darkness, with infanticidal cannibalism (a constant, from the Russian Baba Jaga to the Sicilian 'Serramonica' who, with her face covered, appeared in the middle of Lent to punish "the children who, instead of staying at home, amused themselves in the *quadrivi*" (L. Sorrento, *Folclore e dialetti d'Italia*, in "Aevum. Rassegna di scienze

is also signaled in the other sacrificial rite that, along with the Irish one Giraldus Cambrensis recounts in *Topographia Hibernica*,[10] most closely resembles the Vedic *aśvamedha*: the Roman *october equus*, which Dumézil discusses extensively.[11] He it is, polemically discussing the theses of Herbert Jennings Rose,[12] who considers the agrarian significance of the practice, but only to demonstrate its secondary nature, which can be explained by the following remark: "S'il s'était agi [...] d'un sacrifice offert à une divinité de la fécondité en remerciement de la génération, de la croissance physiologique (*pariendis*) de la moisson, on eût immolé un bovin, symbole di travail de la terre; mais comme il s'agit de reconnaître le service guerrier (*bello*) qui a écarté des champs l'armée ennemie ou les pillards, sans compter les mauvais Esprits, *morbos uisos inuisosque*, comme dira un autre rituel, c'est un cheval, symbole de la guerre, le πολεμιστής de Polybe, qu'on sacrifie."[13] The fact that the sacrifice of the horse essentially celebrates warrior power, does not prevent it from performing, as a derivative effect, a function of protecting the harvest, since it is precisely war that, by protecting the borders, creates the conditions so that the 'homeland soil' can be transformed into a source of sustenance (hence, again according to Dumézil, the apparent ambiguity of Mars,[14] who remains an essentially warrior deity even when, but precisely as a warrior, he militarily watches over and protects the harvest).

The fact that the sacrifice of the horse essentially celebrates warrior power does not prevent it from performing, as a derivative effect, a function of protecting the harvest, since it is precisely war that, by protecting the borders, creates the conditions so that the 'homeland soil' can be transformed into a source of sustenance.

To scrutinize these hypotheses in an accomplished manner would require an analytical deployment that it is impossible for us to mobilize here, although these few hints may suffice to show the entire problematic nature of the horse's relationship to the second and third functions, regardless of whether, as we also believe, its action qualifies first as military and only subsequently as agricultural. Only by way of hypothesis—conjecture that, to tell the

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storiche, linguistiche e filologiche," Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Anno I, Milano 1927, p. 768; my translation); the same 'monstrification' we see at work in the Erynnian vengeance and in the "angui d'inferno" that 'corollate' the face of the Gorgon). The horse linked to fertility becomes in this context deadly equine fury; not therefore a military horse, but a willfully nefarious degradation of the 'agricultural' horse, a figure of fertility rendered chthonic, thus discredited—hence the nocturnal rendering of the mythologem, exactly contrary to its solar association, to which we shall return shortly, ubiquitous in the Indo-European paradigm and where, as with Apollo and Sūrya, the symbol of the chariot recurs concomitantly.

10 So Carlo Donà, in an itinerary of vast and refined sensibility, excellently summarizes the sacrificial act aimed, says Giraldo, at "regem creare": "[...] The new king simulated or consummated a love union with a white horse, which was then sacrificed, cut into pieces and boiled. The king and his retinue would eat the meat, but the king also had to wash himself in the broth, drinking some of it straight from the cauldron. Once this ritual was completed, Giraldo explains, his coronation was finished and his authority complete" (C. Donà, *Per le vie dell'altro mondo. L'animale guida e il mito del viaggio*, Rubettino, Soveria Mannelli 2003, p. 189; my translation). The original tale in G. Cambrensis *Opera*, ed. by J. F. Dimock, Vol. V (*Topographia Hibernica* et *Expugnatio Hibernica*), Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, London 1867, Distinctio III, XXV, p. 169: "Est igitur in boreali et ulteriori Ultoniae parte, scilicet apud Kenelcunnil, gens quaedam, quae barbaro nimis et abominabili ritu sic sibi regem creare solet. Collecto in unum universo terrae illius populo, in medium producitur jumentum candidum. Ad quod sublimandus ille non in principem sed in beluam, non in regem sed exlegem, coram omnibus bestialiter accedens, non minus impudenter quam imprudenter se quoque bestiam profitetur. Et statim jumento interfecto, et frustatim in aqua decocto, in eadem aqua balneum ei paratur. Cui insidens, de carnibus illis sibi allatis, circumstante populo suo et convescente, comedit ipse. De jure quoque quo lavatur, non vase aliquo, non manu, sed ore tantum circumquaque haurit et bibit. Quibus ita rite, non recte completis, regnum illius et dominium est confirmatum."

11 Cf. G. DumÉzil, *La religion romaine archaïque avec un appendix sur la religion des Etrusques*, Payot, Paris 1974[2], pp. 225-239. To an explicit 'paralleling' of *aśvamedha* and *october equus* are devoted the reflections in *ibid.*, pp. 235-238.

12 *Ibid*, pp. 227-235.

13 *Ibid*, p. 230 (a thesis also anticipated with minor variations in Id., *Primordia Civitatis*, in "Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire," no. 39, 1 (1961), p. 65).

14 See Id., *La religion romaine,* cit. pp. 239-240.

truth, already hovers in our outline—would we take the liberty of suggesting: what if the role of the horse in the third and final level did not concern the agricultural symbolism of production, but that of the producers, understood as the male labor force? It would then be a matter of attempting an equine gender genealogy of 'productive forces', inviting a remaking on an archeo-mythological basis of the 'critique of political economy' (Marx rethinking his own categories, 'reformulating' them with Dumézil and Gimbutas...).

While unable to unravel the intricacies of these assessments, it is worth reporting an insightful observation from the monumental work of Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Prince, which certifies their compossibility:

> "There are, however, other specifically Roman issues at stake—as we can see clearly in the (contested) division between military and agricultural festivals. Our own system of classification rigidly separates those two areas of activity. But, as we have seen, in early Rome agriculture and military activity were closely bound up, in the sense that the Roman farmer was also a soldier [...] In the case of the October Horse, for example, we should not be trying to decide whether it is either a military, or an agricultural festival; but see it rather as one of the ways in which the convergence of farming and warfare (or more accurately of farmers and fighters) might be expressed." [15]

Having clarified the 'phenomenon of interference' between the role of the horse in the second and third functions, let us then dwell briefly on the former and then return to focus on the latter singularly taken, where, applied to Konark's colossal chariot, it exhibits in a single object the iconological 'target' with respect to which we are meanwhile endeavoring to adjust our aim.

AŚVAMEDHA

In two eminent pathways of the *Opera senza nome* in which, more than in others, he has decided to twist his lancet into Vedic wisdom, the most ritualistic of civilizations, "where the invisible prevailed over the visible", Roberto Calasso devotes pages of disconcerting *perspicuitas* "to the most imposing sacrifice—the 'horse sacrifice,' *aśvamedha*—which involves the participation of hundreds and hundreds of men and animals."[16]

Innumerable reconstructions have been provided of the *aśvamedha*, fairly in agreement as to the main stages of liturgical performance,[17] which must, however, be framed within the

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15 M. Beard, J. North, S. Price, *Religions of Rome* (2 vols.), Vol. I, *A History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 48.

16 R. Calasso, *L'ardore,* Adelphi, Milan 2010, p. 17; my translation.

17 On the complex ritual of *aśvamedha*, see the insightful S. Fuchs, *The Vedic Horse Sacrifice in Its Culture-historical Relations*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi 1996, but especially the magisterial P.-E. Dumont, *L'Aśvamedha. Description du sacrifice solennel du cheval dans le culte védique d'après les textes du Yajurveda blanc (Vājasaneyisamhitā, Śatapathabrāhmaṇa, Kātyāyanaśrautasūtra)*, Paul Geuthner, Paris 1927; also to Dumont must be ascribed a shorter but very informed contribution on the subject, Id., *The Horse-Sacrifice in the Taittirîya-Brâhmana*, in "Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society," vol. 92, no. 6 (1948), pp. 447-503; also of comprehensive but extremely pregnant approach is the volume by P. Chierichetti, *L'Āśvalāyanaśrautasūtra come fonte per lo studio dell'aśvamedha*, Fondo di Studi Parini-Chirio (Università degli Studi di Torino), Torino 2013, which offers its first perspective on the subject in Id., The *Aśvamedha in the Rāmāyaṇa: A Way to Re-establish the Primordial Unity of the Sacrifice*, in *The Sacrifice at the Basis of the Construction of Indian Identity: Two Specific Studies*, edited by A. Pelissero and P. Chierichetti, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria, 2011, pp. 1-66; very precise, though narrower in scope, is the contribution of R. Zaroff, *Aśvamedha. A Vedic Horse Sacrifice,* in "Studia Mythologica Slavica," no. 8 (2005), pp. 75-86, paragraph *314. L'*aśvamedha *et les rituels apparentés en Europe et Iran* in B. Sergent, *Les Indo-Européens. Historie, langues, mythes,* Payot, Paris 2005[2] · VI.2, § 314, pp. 348-350; and again: the paragraph devoted to *The Example of the Ashvamedha* in R. F. Talbott, *Sacred Sacrifice. Ritual Paradigms in Vedic Religion and Early Christianity*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene (Oregon) 2005, pp. 107-166; the inspiring, as it advances theses at once innovative and ambitious, C. D'Onofrio, *Le 'nozze sacre' della regina col cavallo*, in «Studi e materiali

broader framework—perhaps even coinciding with the very limits of cosmic experience—defined by the act of sacrifice in the Vedic universe.[18]

In a nutshell, and framing the discourse, so to speak, into a 'circumstantial' consideration, the *aśvamedha* is the ritual that, officiated by a king, is associated with the generation of his dynastic descendants and, in some interpretations, also with the annexation of new territories to the kingdom, thus with the definition and protection of borders. In the rite, which lasted three days and involved a staggering number of animal victims[19]—and a procession of priests, the ruler's favorite (*vāvātā*), a virgin, a hundred princesses and a host of other 'extras' in a series of practices calibrated with ruthless precision—a sacred stallion, which is an expression of the Sun[20] and military power (*kṣatra*, which in Sanskrit also means the ruling military caste; *kṣatriya,* on the other hand, is the name of both a member of that caste and the tawny-haired horse), is killed so that its power can be inherited by the ruler who, having remained as chaste as the animal for an entire year, must now give birth to a strong and valiant offspring.

The male political authority of royal power, its military strength and solar symbolism are thus mythically unified in the figure of the horse. Overseeing the ritual is Prajāpati, the Progenitor, not merely the 'dedicatee' of the sacrifice but the divine equivalent of what it actualizes.[21] In the Śatapatha *Brāhmaṇa* Prajāpati is made at once to coincide with the totality of

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di storia delle religioni», nn. 24-25, (1953-1954), pp. 133-162; E. La Terza, *L'Aśvamedha nel RigVeda*, in «Rivista indo-greca-italica», n. 6 (1922), pp. 133-142; finally, the conspicuous work of A. Dhar, *A Dichotomic Interpretation of the Sacrifices of Rājasūya, Vājapeya and Aśvamedha: Their Ritualistic and Monarchial Strata with Reference to the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (Doctoral Thesis submitted to the Assam University Slichar, Department of Sanskrit, 2016).

18 On which there is an immense literature available which, because of its vastness and diversification, we do not think it is appropriate to be recalled here, where we shall limit ourselves, with great selection, to referring to the classics: S. Lévi, *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brâhmaṇas*, Ernest Leroux, Paris 1898 (on p. 137 a quick passage devoted to *aśvamedha*); A. K. Coomaraswamy, *La doctrine du sacrifice,* Dervy-Livres, Paris 1978, where the editor Gérard Leconte has brought together eight articles explicitly devoted to sacrifice by the Sri Lankan scholar, which, focusing on the two basic modes of decapitation and metamorphosis, cannot fail to also touch on the subject of the *aśvamedha* (expanded on in Id., *A note on the Aśvamedha*, in "Archiv Orientální," VII (1936), pp. 306-317).

19 Six hundred and nine according to the count stated in *Vājasaneyisamhitā*, 24, 1-40.

20 In a paragraph expressly devoted to *The Solar Horse*, to which we refer for any broader consideration, Miranda Green, in a text that is capital for us, reasons as follows with regard to the politically structuring sacrificial link between the horse and the solar element: "Horses played a prominent part in Indo-European myth and ritual, and the origins of this may be in the secular value that was placed on the animal [...] The horse is and was in antiquity an animal of great prestige. It is large, handsome, fast, courageous and invaluable in warfare and hunting. It is also a relatively expensive creature to maintain, requiring quantities of high-quality grain. These two features, relating to war and aggression, on the one hand, and prosperity on the other, may have caused the horse to be adopted as a symbol of both war and peace. The animal is a natural beast to use for parades and display, as a symbol of power and leadership [...] If the horse was so valued in life, the evidence that exists for horse-sacrifice in the Indo-European world suggests that the divine recipient must have been regarded with great awe. A major horse-sacrifice which took place in Rome was that of the October Horse, a ceremony in which a horse-race was run on the Ides of October and the right-hand horse of the victorious team was killed with a spear and dismembered. The tail of the sacrificial animal was hung up originally in the house of the king and its blood, mixed with ash from the sacred hearth onto which it was allowed to drip, was connected and used in the agricultural spring-festival of the *Parilia*. We have seen that horses were sacrificed to the sun by the Spartans and Rhodians. Several ancient authors mention that horses were sacred to the Persian sun-god and that they were sacrificed by being burnt entire. This type of sacrifice is known as 'holocaust', an offering where nothing is left for the worshipper, an act generally reserved for the underworld powers or where sacrifice was made for a particularly urgent reason. In the case of a holocaust to the sun-god, the awe and reverence of this high deity is aptly demonstrated, but there may also be the factor of fire, appropriate for the fiery solar divinity and perhaps the idea that the consumed horses would rise in the smoke towards their celestial destination. In a Persian sun-hymn of Zarathustra, the sun is referred to as 'swift-horsed'" (M. Green, *The Sun-Gods of Ancient Europe*, B. T. Batsford, London 1991, pp. 116-117. It should be pointed out that the association between the horse and the sun is not limited to the Vedic context, but is widespread throughout the archaic Indo-European context. As Miranda Green again notes, "solar deities and horses were consistently linked in the European cult-imagery from the Middle Bronze Age to the Romano-Celtic phase" (*ibid.*, cit. p. 23).

21 As perfectly understood by J. C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition. Essays in Indian Ritual, King-*

what is, with the year in which the cycle of preparation for the sacrifice is accomplished, with all the animals involved in the sacrifice, and with the sacrifice itself: "Prajāpati is the sacrifice" (14, 3, 2). (The profound meaning of this stunning series of identities constitutes—in this as in all the other invocations in which it is similarly uttered—the very core of the supreme Hindu tautology, its bursting and transversal pervasiveness, at once dissolving and unifying, so far removed from what modern man is willing to understand.)

Evidently, then, on this side of the political significance related to royal investiture and the renewal of its power in terms of legitimacy, descent and conquest, *aśvamedha* calls into question something far deeper and more constitutive, concerning the status of reality and its original institution. And it is precisely on this point that Calasso's analysis marks a clear difference, detaches the 'group' of δόξαι and proceeds alone into uncharted territory. Thus, in *Ardor*:

> "What is the horse? An eye of Prajāpati, which had swelled and then detached. The Śatapatha *Brāhmaṇa* does not linger for a moment on this statement (nothing is strange to the Vedic ritualist), indeed it immediately goes on to draw far-reaching consequences from it: "The eye of Prajāpati swelled up; it detached: from it was produced the horse; and inasmuch as it swelled up (*aśvayat*), that is the origin of the horse (*aśva*). By means of the sacrifice of the horse the gods rearranged it [the eye] in its place; and verily he who celebrates the sacrifice of the horse makes Prajāpati complete, and becomes complete himself; and this indeed is the expiation for everything, the remedy for everything. With it the gods overcame all evil, even the killing of a brahman they overcame with it; and he who celebrates the horse sacrifice overcomes all evil, overcomes the killing of a brahman."[22]

And in *Ka*, where an entire chapter is woven around *aśvamedha*,[23] in an almost overlapping way:

> "Everything begins, everything ends with the eye, in the eye. In the beginning Prajāpati saw the horse sacrifice. He saw it as one sees an animal passing in front of us. But what was the horse? Prajāpati's eye.
>
> This had happened: Prajāpati looked and wished, into emptiness. His left eye began to swell (*aśvayat*). His left eye fell to the ground. Prajāpati looked at his swollen, detached eye, which had fallen into the dust, and saw that it was the horse (*aśva*). He thought then that first of all he would have liked to become whole again, recover the eye. At that moment he saw the sacrifice, saw the white horse with black patches passing by, mane in the wind. He knew that he would kill it, that he would incise the horse's flesh on its left flank so that its left eye would return to the socket of the orbit, where it used to be. But this time with the almost imperceptible mark of a suture. That scar would be the sign of sacrifice, of life passing away."[24]

What is the meaning of the reported passages? What kind of operation is Calasso attempting by referring to the relationship of identity and sacrificial tearing between the Progenitor and the horse?

The eye where everything begins and ends is that of *reflection*. Calasso—and this is the focus of his Work, what he identifies with the mystery of the mind—intends to pose in Vedic terms the question about the essence of *Nachdenken*.

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ship, and Society, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1985, p. 50: "Prajāpati is the personification of the systematized ritual." For a precise explanatory reference about the 'ontosacral' identity between *aśvamedha* and Prajāpati, see also at least P.-E. Dumont, *L'Aśvamedha. Description,* cit., p. 167 and the very insightful contributions of J. Gonda, *Vedic Gods and the Sacrifice*, in "Numen," XXX (1), 1983, pp. 3-17 and Id., *Prajāpati and Prāyaścitta*, in "The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland," 1 (1983), p. 48. On the figure of the Progenitor, unavoidable for depth and perspicuity are the considerations made in R. Calasso, *L'ardore*, cit., IV, pp. 93-128 (the chapter is aptly entitled *IV. The Progenitor*).

22 *Ibid*, p. 100; my translation.

23 R. Calasso, *Ka,* Adelphi, Milano 1999, pp. 153-182.

24 *Ibid*, p. 157; my translation.

For there to be conscious reflection, there must be given, for the purpose of thinking, an object on which to reflect, toward which the act of thinking is projected and which, once achieved, can reverberate cognitively on what the thought arose from. All Western noetic reflection, from Plato to Hegel, via Descartes and Kant to Husserl, merely interrogates the form of this relationship. The existence of which, however, confronts a tremendous evidence: the act of thinking something, that is, the fact that, for the thinking, a content of thinking is given, provides for the being of a separation, that between what-is-thought and the thinking. What-is-thought, which is also thought by the thinking, and therefore in a certain respect inevitably contained in it, cannot be, at least immediately, the same thing as thinking. To heal this difference is the deepest task of all knowing. If 'healing' fails, no knowledge—and, consequently, no concrete experience—can be given. The theoretical history of the West is the attempt, carried out at different levels and with a capacity for invention that is sometimes astounding, to conceive analytically a set of logical-metaphysical structures capable of justifying and thus producing scientifically—thus objectively—the mutual and coherent integration of thinking and thought. Calasso, however, looks elsewhere. His is a Vedic gaze and moves from another and in some ways complementary assumption. Knowledge, to be such, must be complete, that is, integral, i.e. *absolute*. The formula of this intuition is a religious evidence and could perhaps be adduced as proof of the 'existence of God' (therefore this warning applies here too: He who has ears to hear, let him hear): *if one does not know everything, it is impossible to know even something*.

Assuming that the horse as object of thought emanates from the principle of thought, i.e. the Progenitor, separateness, whereby the object is seen as external, negates the foundation of knowledge and experience, that is, the absolute unity of thinking and thought, and therefore exists as guilt—the most execrable guilt of not knowing and not being.

According to this perspective, there does not exist, nor has there 'ever' existed, a thinking and a to-be-thought that is thinkable and therefore only potentially thought, but the to-be-thought, which cannot have participial form but must maintain the infinitive form of being-thought, exists and can exist only as an internal emanation generated at the very act of thinking. The to-be-thought as being-thought emanates from thought as intrinsic to its *reality*—not, therefore, to its 'ideality,' a dutiful specification because one would otherwise misrepresent the profound meaning of this approach, where the being of the Progenitor, thus the supreme act of its being-and-generating incessantly within itself, is immediately identical to the universal form of the world, thus to the concreteness of real configurations necessarily taken in unity. Not a thought that posits the world, then, but the thought that, as such, *is* world. The consequences of this conception, and an adequate discussion of it, would take us very far. Without losing sight of our own scope, let us instead, more diligently, try to understand how it intersects the 'horse question'.

Excerpts from Calasso provide sufficiently insightful elements in this regard. Assuming that the object of thought, the horse, emanates from the principle of thought, the Progenitor, separateness, whereby the object is seen as external, negates the foundation of knowledge and experience, that is, the absolute unity of thinking and thought, and therefore exists as guilt—the most execrable guilt: of not knowing and not being. In language that borders on Orphic doctrine, we might say that the existence of things as separate from the principle is the supreme ontological guilt. Separateness—thus any existence experienced as a form in its own right, having its own apparent degree of ontic independence—is as such a violation of absoluteness. The very hypnotic existence of forms is a guilty violation. To heal this violation, thus to justify its experience, we shall say, *ex parte subjecti*, and at the same time to restore the violated integrity, sacrifice is necessary. It is, at bottom, nothing more than the 'reversive' act that has to be undergone in order to justify the *'factum'* as a participial form of existing. Existence itself, in order for its manifestation to be legitimate and thus to be said to be concrete, to be enacted and truly experienced, must constantly reintegrate itself into the Wholeness

that, in order to be, it has violated. Remembrance and reaffirmation of the fact that it actually exists only within that Wholeness is the sacrifice by which it must ceaselessly reintegrate itself into that. To exist in separateness is in itself a violation that must be ritually restored by the reconversion *ad Unum* effected by the sacrifice that restores the world into Prajāpati, that reintegrates the world into Prajāpati, that reincorporates the horse into Prajāpati, thus the thought into the constituent thinking that emanated and fulfilled it. The sacred text says that Prajāpati "swelled (*aśvayat*)" into "horse (*aśva*)". Since the eye, i.e., the world mirrored as an 'object,' is thus a swelling of Prajāpati from Himself everted and finally detached, the sacrifice that annihilates this reflection, the apparent independence of the world as a separate manifestation, i.e., the visible and seen form of the horse, will achieve the outcome of 'resufflating' the separate back into the breath that genetically vivified it.

Existence itself, in order for its manifestation to be legitimate and thus to be said to be concrete, to be enacted and truly experienced, must constantly reintegrate itself into the Wholeness that, in order to be, it has violated. Remembrance and reaffirmation of the fact that it actually exists only within that Wholeness is the sacrifice by which it must ceaselessly reintegrate itself into that.

The last word on the essence of things is not and can never be 'political'. With his simultaneously premonitory and regressive elucubrations, Calasso thus has the merit of exhibiting how this swirling insistence on the horse ultimately leads not only to the 'political', but to the constitutive center of the relationship between being and thinking, between thought and experience. The invisible Vedic wisdom prescribes the world under the sign of the horse.

All that will remain of it, etching itself into the background of the visible, is a scar, that of the wounded God-world enabled to return to itself, the one inflicted by the knife that performed the sacrifice and in so doing created the human time that apparently passes and consumes. The act that kills knows that it is moved by the God. In the moment it sinks, the hand that marks the victim experiences its own unity with the Progenitor, it annihilates itself in the Progenitor since He, who heals the violation of the sacrifice, is the sacrifice itself. "Prajāpati is the sacrifice" and the sacrifice is the *aśvamedha*. But never forgetting that "the *aśvamedha* is everything."

THE SOLAR CHARIOT

That [sun] burning up there is the aśvamedha.
Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad

In Valéry's famous dialogue, Eupalinos confides to Phaedrus, "Ce temple délicat, nul ne le sait, est l'image mathématique d'une fille de Corinthe, que j'ai heureusement aimée."[25] He alludes to a miraculous *transposition*: the matrix of something that had existed in organic form and action is re-acted in the marble of the temple. If this circumstance can occur, who can reject as impossible the idea that an architecture can be the synthetic material expression of what unfolds in an Indo-European treatise? How, in other words, does the mythomorphism of the horse find rigorous conformation and architectural confirmation?

At Konark,[26] in Orissa, there is an absolutely peculiar temple because, like the one located at Hampi and dedicated to Garuḍa, the divine progenitor of birds, it architecturally replicates the form of a colossal chariot. Garuḍa, as his vehicle (*vāhana*), is the one who transports Viṣṇu

25 P. ValÉry, *Eupalinos L'*Âme et la danse Dialogue de l'*arbre*, La Républiques des Lettres, Paris 2021, p. 29.

26 कोनारक in devanāgarīī, variously transliterated—which explains the variants in the bibliographical references to follow—as Konarka, Konarak, Konārak, Kanarak, Konārka. For our part, we have adopted and will adopt the spelling Konark.

in his solar aspect; similarly, the temple at Konark is known as the Temple of the Sun since it is dedicated to Sūrya, a deity who, within the Indo-European equivalences system, corresponds, as has been shown by several parties,[27] to the Greek Apollo.

Even in the Indian context, the chariot is a solar symbol par excellence. The connection is primarily figural, since the spokes of the wheels compositionally recall a stylization of the rays emanating from the star. As Miranda Green duly notes in a contribution that is decisive for us:

> "In the image of the wheel, the spokes, which may face inward or outward, correspond to those of the sun and the rim to the solar corona. This solar symbol is especially typical of late prehistoric art from European regions within the temperate belt. From the beginning of the first millennium B.C., when the chariot became widespread in central and western Europe, the wheel was used to represent the sun, as witnessed by authors of the classical world [...] For Greeks and Romans the sun was in perpetual motion, above the earth during the day and in the underworld during the night. The movement and circular shape of the wheel thus made it a perfect solar symbol."[28]

To Miranda Green we likewise owe a very accurate reconstruction of the primary role played by the Sun in ancient Celtic culture; in fact, in her study, and not coincidentally, the solar symbol of the chariot is repeatedly recalled (the Danish find of the Trundholm bronze disk, placed on a horse-drawn chariot, is particularly important in this regard).[29]

There are, however, differing opinions as to whether the Sun is a central element in all Indo-European theology. Minimizing the 'conflict of interpretations', suffice it to say that in the paragraphs of his *Treatise* devoted to *The Sun and Solar Cults*, even Mircea Eliade, following in the footsteps of Adoph Bastian and Frazer, takes care to point out that the symbolism of the Sun, contrary to what one would be led to believe, is far from universally widespread (it would in fact be almost entirely absent in Africa—except, of course, for Egyptian culture—Australia, Melanesia, Polynesia, and Indonesia). It would thus be a constitutive recurrence only for some Mesoamerican civilizations, above all the Incaic and Aztec, and in the Asian and Archaic European contexts. It is difficult, however, to generalize its meaning, so much so that—the Romanian scholar notes not without a vein of controversy—"le soleil a fini par devenir un des lieux communs de l''expérience religieuse indistincte' dans la mesure même où le symbolisme solaire s'est vu réduit

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27 See S. Lal Nagar, *Sūrya and Sun Cult in Indian Art, Culture, Literature, and Thought*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi 1995, pp. 149-150 and p. 389. In his discussion of the correspondences between Sūrya and Apollo, Lal Nagar takes up a particularly significant passage devoted to the same issue (albeit discussing an ornamental matter of specific Buddhist scope) from A. Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India* (23 vols.), Rahul Publishing House, New Delhi 1994, III, p. 97.

28 M. Green, *The Sun Gods*, cit. pp. 57-59, tr. it. di M. Ortelio, *Le divinità solari dell'antica Europa*, ECIG, Genova 1995, pp. 51-52; for editorial reasons, this excerpt has been translated into English from the Italian version of the text. In a following passage, it is then reiterated: "The abundant evidence for the sun-cult in Bronze Age Europe manifests itself above all in the symbolism of the wheel. Sometimes a full-size chariot could evoke solar imagery [...]. There is significance evidence that wheels and sun-motifs are very closely linked". Of the book, see then in general the paragraphs expressly devoted to *The Solar Wagon* (*ibid.*, pp. 66-67) and *The Chariot of the Sun* (*ibid.*, pp. 112-116). In the latter, the author writes, "The image of the sun as driving in a horse-drawn carriage or chariot is common to many Indo-European peoples. We find it in the Vedic mythology of Indra; Xenophon observes that the Persians thought of the sun as a charioteer. By the second century BC the Roman sun-god Sol, probably the old Italian *Sol Indiges*, was represented in a quadriga" (*ibid.*, p. 112).

29 "The earliest Irish 'sun-discs', sheet-gold dress-ornaments dating to the very earliest Bronze Age or Beaker period, are frequently decorated with either cross-in-circle or concentric circle motifs. These may have nothing to do with a sun-cult, but the later Bronze Age 'sun-discs', which are larger and may be of gold or bronze, are another matter. These are frequently decorated with concentric circles, like that at Lattoon, Co. Cavan. Unequivocally solar is the gilded bronze disc at Trundholm in Denmark, pulled on a miniature wagon by a bronze horse and decorated with concentric circles and spirals [...]. There is other Scandinavian bronzework, too, which must possess a solar association. The so-called 'sun-drum' from a bog at Balkåkra near Ystad, Scania, for example, consists of a cylinder whose lid is a flat disc decorated with lines and concentric circles; the cylinder itself is supported on ten model wheels" (*ibid.* p. 41).

à n'être qu'un outillage banal d'automatismes et de clichés."[30] In the classical sphere, then, Eliade tends to decisively downplay the importance of solar symbolism, openly arguing that "en Grèce et en Italie, le Soleil n'a occupé dans le culte qu'une place de tout deuxième plan. À Rome, le culte solaire a été introduit sous l'empire par la voie des gnoses orientales et s'il y est développé d'une manière pour ainsi dire extérieure et artificielle, à la faveur du culte des empereurs."[31] Similarly in India where Sūrya, the Vedic god of the Sun, is a figure "de deuxième catégorie" who "jamais [...] ne s'élève à une condition prééminente."[32]

Also on the same wavelength is a page by Bernard Sergent, a controversial but undoubtedly first-rate figure whose theses deserve in our opinion the most serious consideration, and who writes in this regard:

> "Such a conception of the sun should be linked back to the position occupied by the diurnal star (and the other stars) within Indo-European theologies. In Greece, Helios is an absolutely secondary god, external to the group of the twelve Olympian gods. If he is depicted often enough, he is rarely the object of a cult; not very consistent on the theological level, in some conceptions he is the eye of Zeus or the image of Apollo. In India an identical phenomenon occurs: Sūrya, the Sun, is a second-rate god, subordinate to the other *deva*, and the *Vedas* know of but one or two myths concerning him. Among the Germans, the sun, although depicted in famous images dating back to the Nordic Bronze Age, is a very drab theological figure. Identical situation in the Celtic world, in which, if literary allusions to the sun, or depictions of the star (wheels, crosses, swastikas, etc.) are frequent, in vain one would look in the Celtic *pantheon* for the god, or rather, the sun goddess. *Sol* is a very evanescent Roman god. The only exception in the Indo-European world is the Great Goddess of Arinna, the Sun goddess—who, however, bears a Hatti name, Wurusemu, and therefore pre-Indo-European. In several cultures, the Sun is a figure connected with the Indo-European 'third function': in Rome, for example, she was part of the deities introduced by the Sabine king Titus Tatius; in several Greek cities Helios is connected with Pan, Demeter, Aphrodite, and Apollo the healer; and in Scandinavia, as in Rome, he was part, along with the Moon, of the retinue of a more important third-function deity."[33]

Sergent's piece has the advantage of effectively and succinctly enucleating all the points we would like to contradict.

First of all, he limits the discussion of the Sun only to the hierophanies in which the solar symbol acts directly as a 'protagonist'. This approach is, however, certainly questionable, for in many cases the Sun appears as an *associated symbol*, as in the case of the link with Apollo, which has the effect of placing the Sun at the very center of the Greek *pantheon*, in a position that is anything but marginal (not exactly minor also is the link with Aphrodite, Demeter and Pan—the first two, moreover, like Apollo, deities belonging to the Olympian δωδεκάθεον—on the basis of which it is not clear how the author can speak of a cult that is "not very consistent on the theological level").

While for the Celtic world the already-mentioned—and in our opinion faultless—analyses of Miranda Green apply, on the Indian context we will say something shortly. Indeed, I am of the opinion—and the case of the Konark Temple must finally make this clear—that in both cases such a radical downsizing of the solar symbol—in accordance with a skepticism surprisingly anticipated even by Eliade—really turns out to be an unworkable option.

In the ancient world, moreover, mythical symbolism and philosophical allegory cannot be distinguished at all, and in the most impressive mythopolitical conception of the Greek

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30 M. Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions*, Payot, Paris 1964, III, § 36, p. 116.

31 *Ibid*, § 44, p. 129.

32 *Ibid,* § 45, p. 130.

33 B. Sergent, *Celtes et Grecs / 1. Le livre des Héros*, Payot et Rivages, Paris 1999, tr. it. edited by G. de Turris, *Celti e Greci. Il libro degli Eroi*, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma 2005, pp. 73-74; for editorial reasons, this excerpt has been translated into English from the Italian version of the text.

world, the one presented in the Platonic *Republic*, the Sun appears precisely in the form of the supreme principle which, situated at the summit of the cognitive hierarchy, is also the purest object of contemplation that, philosophically achieved, determines the political superiority of the 'wise men' in charge of the government of the *polis*. It is thereby implicitly asserted that the Sun is an element that unifies political sovereignty and priestly power:[34] philosophers are in fact for Plato true priests of the solar cult, in a model where knowledge of the divine and political authority comes to complete identification. It is thus not at all a question of third function, as Sergent argues! At the apex of the Greek world, the Sun evidently represents the first of the functions defined by Dumézil, marking royal and priestly sovereignty. *It enshrines, in mythical terms, the theological unity of wisdom and power*, and is proof that, as to the original foundation of the Indo-European form of the political, the problem cannot be posed in merely theological terms, but must be carefully rethought on a mythical basis—and in this George Dumézil's lesson turns out to be truly revolutionary and indispensable.

Solar is thus the chariot of Apollo, with which the Platonic one recounted in the *Phaedrus* overlaps,[35] but also, in the Indian context, that of Sūrya, which serves a similar function[36] and of which the Sun Temple at Konark is an eminent architectural example.[37]

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34 Fundamental from this point of view are the considerations on the juridical nature of solar symbolism made in the classic R. Pettazzoni, *L'onniscienza di Dio*, Einaudi, Torino1955, pp. 255-277 and taken up under the heading "Ordalia e divinità" in M. Eliade (a cura di), *Dizionario dei riti*, Jaca Book, Milano 2018; my translation: "The god in whose name one swears is, in essence, evoked as a judge: historically it is usually the gods of the Sun or of light, as such omniscient. Raffaele Pettazzoni (1955) has regarded this judicial role as the fundamental function of an omniscient deity." The union of wisdom and political power, as it occurs at the apex of the Platonic onto-theological framework, expresses as such a *legal* foundation.

35 Apollo is the god of the rational illumination of the 'mind' under whose watchfulness, according to Plato, it grasps the pure forms of Being. This implicit mythological afference, essentially, is what is implied in the *Phaedrus* through the adoption of an Apollonian solar symbol such as the chariot.

36 An exception in this all-male list would be Saulė, the Baltic Sun Goddess mentioned by M. Gimbutas, *The Balts*, Thames & Hudson, London 1963, pp. 198-202. The reference is important because it implies the survival, in Indo-European context, of an earlier mythological figure, in which the solar vocation, rather than showing itself united with male sovereign power, is still associated with the generative 'energy' that fuels beneficial natural cycles.

37 A novel, A. Gupta, *The Treasures of the Sun God,* Bloomington 2012, is devoted to the religious significance of Konark's Sun Temple—so iconic in Indian culture that it is depicted on the reverse side of the 10 Rupee bill—which, although a work of fiction, devotes ample space to an interpretation of the temple on a historical and symbolic basis. There are also numerous monographic descriptions (not infrequently intended for tourist fruition) expressly devoted to the monument, among which it is worth mentioning Th. E. Donaldson, *Konark,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, where the author frames its construction characteristics within the general framework of Orissian-style temple architecture, also placing it in its historical context and discussing the architectural and sculptural details of the main body and adjacent shrines; also significant, especially for the quality of the photographic reproductions signed by the Japanese photographer Oki Morihiro (and although we still prefer the yellowed snapshots of Mary Binney Wheeler, who, moreover, does not share with Morihiro the guilt of having also immortalized Mother Teresa of Calcutta in the catalog, *sic*), the volume B. Bäumer, M. Konishi, *Konārka. Chariot of the Sun-God*, D.K. Printworld, New Delhi 2007. In contrast, a true critical monograph, with specific attention to architectural fact and its symbolic interpretation, is the comprehensive K. S. Behera, *Konarak. The Heritage of Mankind*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi 1996. As far as we have been able to sound out, on the Konark Sun Temple the most conceptually relevant contribution seems to us to be that of D. Bandyopadhyay, *Architectural Description of Konark Sun-Temple*, in "Loukik," IV, 1-2, pp. 111-121, which confirms the theses advanced by the foremost interpreter of Indian temple architecture, Stella Kramrisch, according to which the structure of the building was derived from a precise architectural transposition of metaphysical-religious instances (in contrast to the views of N. K. Bose, *Canons of Orissan Architecture*, Cosmo Publications, New Dehli 1982). Kramrisch dealt with the symbol of the Sun and the chariot in Hindu temples on several occasions in her *magnum opus*, originally published in 1946 in Calcutta, see S. Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (2 vols.), Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi 1976, I, p. 40, p. 159, pp. 281-285 and II, pp. 373-374, pp. 422-423. More specifically, see also S. Kramrisch, *Review* of A. Boner, R. P. Dāsa, R. Ś. Sadāśiva, *New Light on the Sun Temple of Koṇārka. Four Unpublished Manuscripts Relating to Construction History and Ritual of This Temple*, in "Artibus Asiae," 37, no. 4 (1975), pp. 306-307, which refers to the seminal volume edited for Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, Varanasi 1972, with respect to which it is impossible not to agree with the enthusiasm of the scholar who speaks,

Its construction during the 13th century is attributed to the ruler Narasingha Deva I of the Eastern Ganga dynasty.

We had said, following the method suggested by Eupalinos, that we wanted to read in its structure the articulation of the Indo-European paradigm. Well, there is certainly no shortage of elements to that effect: seven, like the seven metrical types of Sanskrit prosody, are the horses that pull it, twenty-four the carved wheels, so that each symmetrical pair corresponds to a month of the Hindu calendar; around the temple there then meet other imposing equestrian statues, where the animals, whose pose and harness accentuate their use in a military context, are flanked by heroes in the act of subduing the enemy, crushed by the horse under its own shield.

Once again, therefore, chariot, sun and horse are included in a single coherent symbolic context that unequivocally associates the religious significance and ritual practices of veneration taking place in the temple with a specific military ascendant. For there is no doubt that the Konark stone chariot displays all the characteristics of the Indo-European war chariot. At stake, then, in the solar devotion to Sūrya, is again the theological investiture of sovereignty, which, through the chariot, is placed in relation to a peculiar war technology. The chariot, in fact—and on this point Sergent's analysis is instead impeccable[38]—is a fundamental element in understanding how, since at least the third millennium B.C.,[39] Indo-European expansion has been possible, that is, how, moving from the steppes[40] of southern Russia, the nomadic Kurgan culture was able to invade and subjugate such a vast territory to its rule, gradually knocking out the resistance of the local populations.

Haarmann himself (but the references could be many), devoting a specific chapter to *The War Chariot: A Little Cultural History*, makes explicit reference to Sūrya,[41] concluding his argument with a hint that is undoubtedly obvious but therefore no less decisive:

> "This mythological image of the war chariot appears in Plato's *Phaedrus* dialogue[42] and, quite similarly, in a Vedic text written in Sanskrit (*Katha Upanishad*). How to explain such parallels in the mythological tradition of two regional Indo-European cultures? Do they perhaps refer

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commenting on its reading, of "an unusual emotion: the awe of certitude", since "the temple in its purpose and in all its parts is literally accounted for in the manuscripts that are here published and translated for the first time." We therefore refer to this same publication for a more in-depth study of the monument in question.

38 See in this regard paragraph *248. La question du char de guerre*, in B. Sergent, *Les Indo-Européens,* cit., VI.2, § 248, pp. 316-317.

39 At least to that era, Haarmann points out, should be backdated the introduction of the chariot that the nomadic herders of the steppe would first develop and employ in their warlike feats of conquest: "The oldest remains of a two-wheeled car with the characteristics of a war chariot come from the southern Urals and date from the late 3rd millennium B.C. The high age of this find suggests that it was the prototype of a war chariot. Evidently, it was the tomb of a warrior, for among the grave goods are arrowheads and bronze weapons (dagger, axe). Also present are animal bones indicating the ritual burial of a horse. Examination of these and other horse bones found in graves containing chariots reveals that the steppe nomads used a large horse, with a height at the withers of 160 cm, as their draught animal" (H. Haarmann, *Auf den Spuren der Indoeuropäer*, cit., p. 104; my translation. For the data concerning the horse Haarmann refers in turn to E. E. Kuzmina, *The Prehistory of the Silk Road*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2008, p. 61).

40 The hypothesis that the invention of the war chariot should be located in the Near East is thus reasonably refuted (cf. H. Haarmann, *On the Traces of the Indo-Europeans*, cit., p. 104). Indeed, the flat character of the Eurasian steppe proves to be a fundamental morphological condition allowing its development. As noted in a for us fundamental contribution by D. W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel and Language. How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2007, p. 403: "Two-wheeled war chariots were first invented in the steppe zone, where they found use for war purposes."

41 Cf. H. Haarmann, *Auf den Spuren der Indoeuropäer,* cit., p. 105; my translation: "Also in the world of the Indian gods does the two-wheeled chariot make its appearance: it is the means of transportation of Sūrya, god of the sun [...] His chariot is drawn by seven horses and the wheels have twelve spokes. Sūrya's charioteer is Aruna."

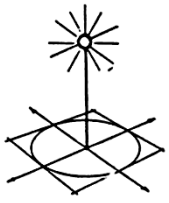
42 Haarmann's reference here is D. S. Werner, *Myth and Philosophy in Plato's* Phaedrus, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 110 ff.

> to a common origin, to be found in the period of the spread of that chariot in Eurasia (i.e., in the 2nd millennium B.C.)? This would not be an entirely weird hypothesis, since ancient mythical figures such as the Proto-Indo-European shepherd god, for example, have also been preserved in the peripheral areas."[43]

Touché! A promising correspondence is alleged, which would *culturally* motivate its appearance, between the Platonic chariot of Apollo and that of Sūrya. But then, with all that has been said and shown, is one implicitly bringing back an eminent form of the Greek philosophical narrative to the archaic Indo-European plexus that sees Sun, chariot and horse mythologically associated? Precisely. And what is still lacking to graft the discourse onto the solarity of the chariot in the articulation of the Platonic ἐπιστήμη?

In it, the absolute luminescence of the Good is solarized not as the form of military power, but as the intelligible summit of thinking *and* being, from which, epistemologically, derives the possibility, for the νοῦς that grasps the true, of thinking the being. Again, then, the 'model' is primarily metaphysical and not political. The solar 'allegory' chariot and horses (in the plural, like the winged pair in *Phaedrus*) therefore finally refer to the supreme principle of a metaphysics of light that may represent the culmination of the whole Indo-European celestial system. Let us then explore this further element, proceeding with a final remark that rather than being properly carried out we shall merely formulate in the guise of a hint.

Again in relation to architectural objects—demonstrating how solar symbolism does indeed play a primary role in the Indian articulation of the experience of the sacred—Adrian Snodgrass, in a paragraph with an already explicit title, *The Sun as a Centre*, makes the following point (the relationship between stupa architecture and solar symbolism is at stake, which the author addresses by illustrating the diagram shown):



> "The orientation of the stupa plan is determined by reference to the movements of the sun; the plan is a geometric diagram of the solar cycle; its axes locate the successive positions of the sun's course. This has a more than merely astronomical significance and expresses the symbolism of the metaphysical Sun, the source and centre of the worlds.
>
> In both the Brahmanic and Buddhist traditions the sun is the symbol of the supreme Principle, the transcendent Centre of the universe. In the Brahmanic texts the Sun is Cosmic Intelligence and the light it radiates is intellectual Knowledge; it is the abode of Brahman and Puruṣa and the seat of the cyclic legislator, Manu. The Sun's rays measure out the worlds, bring all things into existence, quicken all beings [...] The Sun is the sacrificial Person who is "poured out upon the earth from East to West" [...] The Sun's light is progenitive, "for progeny indeed is all the light". The Sun's rays are his sons and every animate being is filiated from the Sun [...]."[44]

It should also be noted that in the Pali tradition the Buddha is himself referred to as "kinsman of the Sun [...] the Buddha, like the Sun, sees all things simultaneously."[45] Like the example of the Sun Temple in Konark, therefore, the case of the stupa demonstrates that there is a wholly relevant set of—religious, anthropological, architectural—practices in which the

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43 H. Haarmann, *Auf den Spuren der Indoeuropäer*, cit., p. 106; my translation.

44 A. Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi 1992, p. 24.

45 *Ibid.*

Sun takes on the value of a true supreme metaphysical Principle around which are organized both the intangible system of symbolic representations and the objects and constructions in which material culture is articulated. The explicit reference to Brahmanical culture also makes clear how the understanding of the Sun as "Supreme Principle" is the overall prerogative of the Indian world, not of its Buddhist component alone.

Of Snodgrass's description, two elements deserve particular attention because they correspond precisely to what can be found in the *Platonic doctrine of truth* set forth in the *Republic*. Here, too, the Sun is "Cosmic Intelligence," that is, it is characterized as the supreme principle of a epistemological character, exactly like the pure act of thought—νόησις—which for Plato—thus, in fact, the Analogy of the Line set forth in *Book VI*—identifies the purest and most intense moment of supersensible knowledge. But the supreme Understanding also coincides with the constituent capacity of the Absolute, which, as in the case of the Good, makes ontologically possible the essential existence of ideas, made visible in their appearance by the primordial luminosity that spreads over them. The Sun, then, is not only the supreme cognitive principle where the formal identity of each idea with itself is safeguarded; it, in fact, emanates a light that *constitutes* each idea in the determinate space of its own existence ("bring<s> all things into existence"), thus being the generative ("progenitive") foundation that not only establishes, by revealing it, the form of essence, but likewise posits the *existence of essence*, extruding its concrete content into the transcendental medium of visibility. The Sun, in other words, symbolizes not only the suprareal One that logically safeguards identity as the sovereign category of Being, but is also the *father* of that which, concretely, realizes Being as noetically intuitable concrete content. And precisely this dual character, jointly epistemological and ontological, of the solar Principle, expressly unites both the Platonic model and the sacred architecture of the stupa.

The coincidence of supreme knowledge and solarity as the ontotheological foundation of the political, while on the one hand demonstrating how the legal legitimacy of power must be thought of on a *mythical* basis, on the other hand reproposes the radicality of the model defined by Calasso, who, with exceptional acuity, had suggested how, already on a 'Vedic basis' thus in the remotest primordial of the Indo-European ritual 'trace', the question of the horse could not be reduced to a genealogy of the 'political'. but, going to the first and last Principle from which the reciprocal nexus between being and thinking springs, posed itself first and foremost from a metaphysical point of view.

(Missing from this perspective would be a proper mythological-comparative analysis of the Winged Chariot of the *Phaedrus* that, keeping in mind both the horse-chariot-solarity nexus and the equestrian principle of the sacrificial Progenitor, thus the unity of Prajāpati and *aśva-medha*, would unveil the deeper meaning of the Platonic myth by grafting it securely into its archaic Indo-European matrix. However, the pivotal points from which it is possible to proceed are all already fixed).

Through the reference to the Temple of Konark and the solar chariot of which it consists, we thus find ourselves confirming the preliminary nature—and thus the necessity—of a metaphysical approach to the problem. Chariot and horse, though symbols of power, declined both in political (first function) and military (second function) terms, finally refer to the luminous, perhaps even blinding nexus that—from the most archaic India to Plato, and then again, returning to the East, in the Orissa of the Gangas—links the metaphysical firstness of concrete knowledge of the Absolute to the sovereign mythologem of solar light.

CODA

It might occur to some to wonder why so much effort is put into the analysis of these 'oddities'. What is significant about (wanting?) to find in a temple not only the architec-

tural articulation of the equestrian mythologem but even the action of what, symbolically, acts through that form. A political-social paradigm or, more deeply, a conception of the world—or even more deeply: an essential ordering *(ṛta)* that should concern the being in form of things as such then but, fatally, also now. If it is true that, of the many things that, of the past, have actually passed away, it cannot be ruled out that something, and perhaps precisely the essential ordering we have mentioned, has been able to propose itself in such an extreme and affirmative way as to hinge on being in a perpetual manner, that is, being capable of existing both in a past form. Since it concerns that which of the past cannot pass away in a form that, never having passed away, has been able to reach and mark the present as well. This persistent form is a mystery that we certainly do not imagine we can unravel. We can at best train ourselves to recognize some of its many appearances.

As when, between the Bundestag library and the dome of Berlin's Reichstag, poised over the Spree, we see Marino Marini's Etruscan *Miracle* tossed into the air, mangled, does the king-cavalier plummet backward, unseated by republican egalitarianism? Elsewhere, in front of the Quirinal, then a papal residence also known as Monte Cavallo (!), the two Dioscuri of the Fountain commissioned by Sixtus V are mighty warriors with menacing steeds in a rampant posture (a sculptural colossus reworked and translocated, perhaps, from the Baths of Constantine, which some have even wanted to interpret as a doubling of Alexander with Bucephalus): perhaps, unlike reunified Germany, Italy's is an invariably clerical Republic lagging perpetually behind itself, where the 'reigning' President dwells in the palace of the high priest, an equestrian Republic therefore and never quite secular.

Aristotle attributes to Thales the sentence that "everything is full of gods" (*An.,* I, 5, 411 a 8). We may borrow it by saying that *everything is full of myths* and make it the 'label' of our *mythosophy*. Indeed, we seem to glimpse myths everywhere: they establish the 'political', they encircle us, they test our gaze; or perhaps it is just projective *mania* and we clothe the world with improvident intellectual smokescreens? King Arthur, Cangrande harnessed in plain color above the Scarpian ark in concrete and gray cantilevered support, Gattamelata in front of the 'minarets' of the 'nameless saint', Verrocchio's *serenissimo* Colleoni, Charles V with extended spear for Titian, Napoléon *d'après* David, the whole Indo-European equestrian dynasty, emperors and captains of fortune of one fearsome 'mounted army'...

But one may perhaps dare to go even further. A friend who thinks shrewdly even goes so far as to assume in one of the most extraordinary and contracted hallucinations in cinematic history, "the horse that turns to the ground in *Andrei Rublev*'s prologue", "the passage of the symbol through time"; while—we speculate by (perhaps somewhat twisted) counterpoint—the horse that, during the Tartar sack, tragically collapses from a scaffold, disarticulating itself like a constructivist toy, could be the way the same symbol reveals the moment when time no longer filters through and something destroys itself: Andrei has killed and possible redemption finally exits history, dramatically tipping over into damnation. Hence the incomparable silence of the Holy Painter.

Do we want to see too much, making everything the gaze passes through a "forest of symbols" and exaggerating with the unification of everything with everything? What are we looking for? What do we really want to find, we ask again, contemplating a temple that reproposes—and admittedly in an all too recent era—yet another variation on the mythical morphism of the horse?

The temple alludes to a time permanently foreclosed. By persisting in observing it, we essentially want only one thing: to relive the ancient rituals even though we know that they can never again occur according to the practices that performed them. The temple, then, is our gateway not to *aśvamedha*, but to that which through it was propitiated even before the temple existed. The deeper we go into the *garbha gṛha*, the 'womb-chamber' of the sanctuary, the more we are overwhelmed, starkly and potentially lethally, by the same One which acted on the 'backstage' of those primordial sacrifices, set them up and

made them be. We must learn to experience the same thing even if, at least in appearance, before our eyes nothing is accomplished: the temple stones remain motionless, the carved images ignore us.

Naming this very special and very risky form of learning is a word whose meaning has reached such a level of degradation today that its primary and most promising sense is obscured: study, *studium*: assiduous application of the mind to something and, at the same time, that which indicates the 'object' of this application. That is, we are conjecturing that by assiduously applying itself to the temple, the mind becomes the temple, and that, when this happens, it is invaded by the same mythic power that posited the temple and that, in even earlier times, required, in order to be and to make the World Order be, to be evoked through the sacrifice of the horse.

The existence of the temple only serves to produce in actuality the awareness that *aśvamedha*, which "is everything", has never ceased to be celebrated. In studying the temple, the mind reenacts and repeats *sub specie aeternitatis* the horse sacrifice. Any reasonable person will find this idea insane, absolutely specious and in any case impossible. It is better for everyone that the vast majority of men continue to think this way. •

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