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“Desire and Deceit: India in the Europeans’ Gaze”

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# Nostos

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The word “desire” suggests a distance between the appetitive subject and the object commanding attention, that possession does not remove. The newly acquired “asset” may fill a collector with pride, or serve utilitarian ends in the absence of any sense of empathetic identification or admiration. A case apart, and a more redeeming one, is what René Girard calls “triangular desire”, induced by a mediator’s influence: desire according to another, opposed to desire according to oneself (Girard 4). The object is not desired for its unmediated appeal, but for what it represents in the eyes of a third party that dictates the table of values and carries the staff of institutionalized authority. In time, India was alienated into an empty sign of imperial prestige ( “jewel in the crown”), a target of religious conversion invested with the mandatory mission of prophesying Christianity (the “star in the east”), the application ground of ideological experiments carried out by reformists, such as Madame Blavatsky and her American theosophists, etc. Even the “Indomania” of eighteenth- century Germany has been interpreted as a symptom of compensatory Narcissism under the occupation of French revolutionary and Napoleonic armies (Germana 10).

The opposite of desire is the mirror scene, or the *anagnorisis* of spiritual dissent or affiliation. India is recognized as racial cradle and origin of the European linguistic community. Analogies are sought out among India’s foundational myths, spaces of knowledge or of symbolic representation. The phenomenon exceeds by far the significance of a search for an Arcadian past triggered by the alienating effects and psychological pressure of

technological progress in the advanced civilizations. Actually, in the later nineteenth century Indian thought was being perceived as tangent upon the latest scientific theories. The remark was made by Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu, whose notebooks jotted down during his studies in Vienna and Berlin (at Humboldt University, named after one of the founders who had been enthralled by *The Bhagavad Gita*) add up to a “biographia literaria” of about twenty thousand pages. This encyclopaedic work, which gives a comprehensive picture of emerging theories in all disciplinary fields, includes references to Rudolf Clausius and Heinrich von Helmholtz, who elaborated on the second law of thermodynamics (the law of entropy). Indian cosmogony, alternating creation and regression of the universe to an immaterial form of existence, a vibrating nothing which nowadays is called quantum singularity or indestructible structure of information, was not the only Indian correlative of the rapidly changing scientific picture of the universe:

He, the One and Undifferentiated, who by the manifold application of His powers produces, in the beginning, different objects for a hidden purpose and, in the end, **withdraws the universe into** Himself (*Svetasvatara Upanishad: Ch.4*) (our emphasis).

In Eminescu’s time Romanian culture was oriented to the German-speaking world, maybe because the country was enthusiastic over the recent ascension of the Hohenzollern dynasty. It was in this space inhabited by scholars who had earned the reputation of being the “Indians of Europe” (De Careil 102) that the young

student appropriated Indian philosophy to the point where it was allowed to shape his own world outlook. The protagonist of his poem *Hyperion* travels back in time, absorbed by the thirst of the Demiurge who draws things back to Himself. His beloved is a Blue Flower who dies to the world of matter and acts as the poet's mediator to a transcending one of meditation, as in Novalis. Death restores humans to their true selves, while the loss of kingdoms (whether in *King Lear* or in the recent revolutionary events in Paris) breeds thoughts on the vanity of the world, which is deception, a dream of eternal death. Poetry is an objectified form of the mind, a revelation of the essential Self (*Tat tvam asi*). Love brings disappointment like everything else in an illusionary world. His beloved is no Maitreyi (*The Bruhadaranyaka Upanishad*), Yāgnavalkya's philosophically-minded wife, but a sensuous creature, born in the likeness of Kātyāyani, Yāgnavalkya's mundane wife, who blames him for sinking into deep thoughts, and meditating on the Assyrian fields ...

Hindu philosophy comes to mind many times, as we survey the ideas that shaped the cultural history of the West since the eighteenth century to the present.

German and English Romanticism shared a web of metaphors in response to India emerging from behind the veil through enhanced cultural ties. The process of self-realization and progress to the supersensuous domain, which is central to the Krishna myth in *The Bhagavad Gita*, out of which Novalis drew his rapidly disseminated "blue flower motif", preceded the Hegelian growth of the mind philosophy, while the Wordsworthian "recollection in tranquillity" motif is analogous to the Purusha/ Prakriti dichotomy. The connection is more explicit in the soul/ Over-Soul relationship in Emerson's poem and essay of the same title, where he echoes "the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us" (Goldberg 32). P.B. Shelley, the author of *Lines to an*

*Indian air*, used both representations: Epipsychidion, to which the soul returns, and the female alter-ego associated with the blue air of the dawns (*I arise from dreams of thee*).

Heredity as destiny was perceived as a modern version, decked with biological evidence, of the ancient belief in metempsychosis, which, according to *The Bhagavad Gita* (Chapter 8), preserves features of previous incarnations, by writers who thematized the topic (Robert Montgomery, Theophile Gautier, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Bram Stoker, Mihai Eminescu, Liviu Rebreanu ...). The solipsism of the self shut up in a dream of the world (Walter Horatio Pater, "Conclusion" to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*) induced by the senses, the illusionary nature of the world of experience ("for the world is only a psychological phenomenon, and what they seemed they were" - Ch. XIII of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy) bridged Vedic thought and the late nineteenth-century school of physiological psychology (pragmatism), which fuelled the synaesthetic poetics of the impressionists and of the aesthetic decadence. In *The Bhagavad Gita*, Rudolf Steiner saw the "unified plan of world history", as in it mingled three spiritual streams: Veda, Sankhya, Yoga (Steiner 1).

The two levels of consciousness theorised by Henri Bergson in *Les données immédiates de la conscience* - the "moi" immersed in the here and now of immediate experience and the "moi" of memory that discovers patterns and meaning in recollection - go back to the often quoted allegory of the two birds (one hyperactive, collecting food, the other watching it eat in perfect composure) in *The Mundaka Upanishad*. In the age of quantum mechanics and polyvalent logics, analogies increase by geometrical progression. The schooling of Svetaketu in *The Chandogya Upanishad*, VI (Sections 8 to 14) upon the existence of what cannot be perceived by the senses is realised in the form of a parable. The disciple wants to

know the nature of the ultimate reality, and his father practises a sort of midwifery. Let the disciple think of salt dissolved in water. Such is the essence of the universe which cannot be seen but pervades all things. The disappearance of melting salt and its recovery through evaporation has a modern correlative in David Bohm's ink experiment (Pratt: web) whereby he demonstrated the existence of an implicate order enfolded into the viscous fluid of a turning cylinder, an operation similar to the turning of a glove inside out. The American physicist concluded: "[I]n the implicate order the totality of existence is enfolded within each region of space (and time)" (Bohm 172). The explicate order of the physical universe we live in is only a lower dimensional surface appearance.

The inner essence of existence is revealed through images, reads a passage in *Vishnu Samhita* (Chapter 29, v 55-7), an ancient ritual text, which may have been unknown to Alfred Binet (1857-1911), the Paris psychologist who replaced categorical syllogism with syllogistic reasoning through images (Binet 130-145), but not to imagist William Butler Yeats, a member of the Theosophical Society founded by Blavatsky:

Without a form how can God be mediated upon? If (He is) without any form, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to, it will slip away from meditation or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering, however, that the form is a superimposition and not a reality (Kamlesh 301-302).

The New Physics, with its descent at the unseen, subatomic level, of immaterial particles, of interchange between mass and energy, with its unpredictabilities, uncertainties and superposition of states favoured the rise of postformal logic. The origin is back there, around the year 200 CE, when Buddhist Nāgārjuna reformed the Vedic tradition, deconstructing categories, denying the

autonomy of a stable self and the self-identity and autonomy of everything ("emptiness"), for whatever exists is related. Nāgārjuna worked, ahead of Leibniz, with two logics, two truths (existence suspends non-existence, and the other way round, the two states being alternatively realized as is light's double nature)

The existence of the third alternative, of the middle way is essential to Nagarjuna's *Mūlamādhyaṃakārikā*, for example, which begins by denying both p and not-p in various cases: these eight negations do not correspond to an eight-valued logic, but to four examples where both p and not-p are denied: [...] Briefly, the middle way requires the rejection of the "law" of the excluded middle, it is the "law" that is wrong, and not the path that is non-virtuous! [...]

The second point is that the empirical decision need not necessarily be in favour of two-valued logic. Naturally, to make this empirical decision regarding the logic underlying deduction, we would like to use our most sophisticated physical theories, such as quantum mechanics. And for this we might need to allow for the possibility that Schrödinger's cat can be both alive and dead at a single instant of time. Though I no longer believe in formalism, a more formal statement is that the axioms of quantum mechanics are derivable from a quasi truth-functional logic, of which Buddhist logic may be regarded as an example (C. K. Raju. Web).

The logic of the included middle is rooted in Hindu ontology, the dialectical nature of Brahman being explained in a deconstructionist philosophy of language with the sign defined as difference, non-a being embedded in a, which includes its counter in negated form:

In the beginning this universe was water alone. That water produced Satya. Satya is Brahman. Brahman produced Prajapati and Prajapati the gods. Those gods meditate on Satya. This name Satya consists of three

syllables. Sa is one syllable, it is one syllable and ya is one syllable. The first and last syllables are the truth. In the middle is untruth. This untruth is enclosed on both sides by truth; thus truth preponderates. Untruth does not hurt him who knows this (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*: Part 5).

The structure of the universe in the Upanishads is a spatialized form of Brahman, individual souls occupying parts of it, plots. All souls participate in the divine essence, which resembles Deleuze's body without organs. Following his father's advice, Svetaketu decomposes things to seeds which, when broken, reveal the nothingness at the heart of everything:

The father said, "My son, that subtle essence which you do not perceive there - in that very essence stands the being of the huge nyagrodha tree. In that which is the subtle essence of all that exists has its self. That is the True, that is the Self, and thou Svetaketu art That" (*The Chandogya Upanishad*, Chapter XIII).

A familiar echo is sent by Nietzsche's gloss on the individual's will to power, whose supreme form is the will not to will anything, thereby proving the supreme mastery which is exercised over the self. This self-control and repression of desire are the condition for the Hindu to achieve freedom from the world of false illusions and suffering:

Commanding, which is to be sharply distinguished from the mere ordering about of others, is self-conquest and is more difficult than obeying [...] What the will wills it has already. for the will wills its will. Its will is what it has willed [...] Hence the will to power also cannot be cast aside in exchange for the will to something else, e.g., for the "will to Nothing" ; for this latter will also is still the will to will, so that Nietzsche can say, "It (the will) will rather will Nothing, than not will" (Heidegger 108).

Indian scholars are nowadays some of the most persuasive discourse makers in general

systems theory or in interdisciplinary studies, coming naturally to minds shaped by the holism of Vedic philosophy. Buddhism is actually a substantial chapter in contemporary physics and mathematics (set theory, systems theory, number theory, string theory ...)

Is this Indian revival the nation's entry under the favourable sign of an affined and worldwide regime of knowledge? Or is it the *nostum* (homecoming) of the prodigal West?

This homecoming started in the late eighteenth century with German romanticism, whose transcendentalist aspiration received a codified form in the blue flower metaphor - the colour of Krishna whose flute is calling humans to the awakening of the soul within themselves, which is the realization of their community in one universal spirit: Atman is manifested in the form of jivas, which may be likened to the akasas enclosed in pots (*Advaita Prakarana*. Ch. 3 *On Non-Duality*).

The scene in Count Hohenzollern's library, where time can be entered at any point, narrated by Novalis in his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (originally entitled "The Blue Flower") links up through time with Eliot's universal library at the end of *The Waste Land*. "Who is the third who walks always beside you?". The mediating third is the teacher initiating disciples into the meaning of the Vedas, into the order of culture, the reified centres of consciousness in which is manifest the "voice in the thunder": *The deity fire became the organ of speech and entered the mouth (Aitareya Upanishad, 4)*. The upanishads end with a peace chant (Shanti Mantras) for the protection of the line of teachers, descending from divinity (*May He protect us both <teacher and the taught!>*), and for peace between teachers and disciples, the meaning of peace being the overcoming of duality between pure consciousness and maya:

May my speech be fixed in my mind, may my mind be fixed in my speech! O self-luminous Brahman, be manifest to me. O

mind and speech, may you bring me the meaning of the Vedas!

Teacher and disciple become free, acceding to transcendental consciousness, and that means putting an end to suffering. The Book is the fusion of subject and object in the spatialized time of consciousness, not of the individual jiva, but as intersubjectivity (Dia-Logos).

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*Encased in a loop of memory, there is a girl, not yet out of her teens, who is reading Louis Bromfield's novel, The Rains Came. The vivid characters and scenes have not faded in my mind, but the interpretation has changed. A party of westerners are there, with a missionaries' agenda, but it is they who get converted to a moral life. The pages from the one on which Lady Edwina Esketh falls ill to the last were missing. Why have I never looked up the book in a library to read the missing plot? Is it because I would have liked Edwina to be rewarded for her exemplary conversion to virtue? Or because I want to treasure untouched an experience of the golden age? It may be that I have finally realized that incommensurate India will always be a book with missing pages ...*

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