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# Eliade in the Looking Glass

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## Abstract

Our paper focuses on the intertwining of modern travel writing with a series of major questions pointing to Western culture. In the real or imaginary texts of Mircea Eliade, Thomas Mann and J.-M.G. Le Clézio, European identity is at stake. Regardless of their different starting points, the authors end up questioning the status of the equation civilized versus wild, as a basic principle of Western culture. A special emphasis is placed by the three writers on the stereotypes of the encounter Self / Other, fostered by modern European culture mainly through mythical patterns.

[Key words: travel writing; European identity; marginal; exotic]

## 1. Myths of European Identity

It is common knowledge that standard European identity has always been flaked by the image of the other, both as a barbaric figure opposed to the Western man and as an obstacle to a free cross-cultural communication. One of the basic principles of Western culture and a major landmark of European identity has been the equation civilized versus wild. In the process by which Western identity was constituted, the opposition civilized versus barbarian as well as the figure of *the Barbarian* played an important part. The myth of the barbarian is tightly bound up with the main mythical components of Western identity (Bartra, 1994:146).

Traveling creates images of the other, analyzes otherness, and makes it easier to accept and to cope with (Moura, 1998). In the real and imaginary travelogues of Mircea Eliade, Thomas Mann and J.M.G. Le Clézio that I am pointing to in the following pages, one can see the intertwining of modern travel writings with major questions concerning Western culture.

Turning the tables on those who suggest that the primitive peoples, discovered and colonized by European explorers, gave birth to the myth, we have to accept that, in fact, the already existing myth of the wild man shaped the reactions of the Europeans to real people. In this way, the wild man underpins the notion of civilization on which much of Western identity has been based (Bartra 147-48).

The very idea of a contrast between a wild natural state and a civilized cultural configuration is part of an ensemble of myths sustaining the identity of the civilized West and emphasizing the *otherness*, the *difference*. Yet, one needs to merely cast an eye on the myth of the wild man to realize that we are dealing with an imaginary form existing only on a mythological level (Duer 1986).

In his book, *India, the Library of the Maharajah*, Mircea Eliade usually sets the epithet "barbarian" between inverted commas when he is referring to India or to Indians. It is his way of showing that he is using it as a quotation from the standard European discourse. (The discourse of the white man

who brought “civilization” to India). By using it, the author of the journal is challenging the idea, turning its meaning upside down: “In double ventilated train cars, Americans are praising the blessings and the reforms of continental civilization in a barbarian country” (Eliade a. 54). And further on: “Benares is stretching in all its weary barbarian beauty” (Eliade a. 64).

At a certain point the author maintains that “barbarian is rather the outlook of modern Europeans on the botanical garden: a concept that can only have its roots in a stupid epoch like the nineteenth century” (Eliade a. 104).

The current equation is reversed. The barbarian is the civilization-bringing Englishman who seeks to build up a monotonous town like Darjeeling, in order to feel at home: “Englishmen who are forced to spend a longer time in wilderness would make any effort to change their habitat into a small corner of England. It is they who refer to local people as *poor savages*” (Eliade a. 106).

Civilization, its motives, and its models unify but also flatten differences and nuances. “It is not Europe - splendid and immortal reality - that I dislike, he concludes. It is the stupid tendency of the European of molding all the rest of the world after himself” (Eliade a. 84).

In Thomas Mann’s travel journal *Travelling with Quixote* the relationship between civilized and barbarian is explicitly phrased and emphatically reiterated. The epithet “civilized” is frequently used. Mann is, for instance, talking about “being disgusted of the mechanism of civilization” deeply hidden within his own personality. He also expresses his desire to give up civilization for primitivism, and uncertainty, for the irrational and for adventure:

Does this pleasure betray my own disgust with the mechanism of civilization, a desire to abandon it, to deny it, to reject it, as being destructive for my soul and for

my life, a desire to search for a new life style, closer to the primitive and to improvisation? Is there in me a voice that is crying for the irrational, for this cult of danger, of risks and of abuses, this cult against which I have been guarded by my critical rational consciousness, a cult which I have fought against - out of my sympathy for the European, for rationality and for order, or maybe because of an in-built need for balance - as if I didn’t have in myself enough to battle against?” (Mann 293).

The escape of the self-exiled writer from Europe provides an opportunity to take a stimulating distance and to review a highly debatable equation. Civilization and the barbaric - generally speaking - are for Mann the torn halves of a cultural hybrid. The German writer is able to discover a barbarian side of modern European culture - the barbarity of Nazism, for instance, as well as Nietzsche’s criticism of canonical European values.

Nietzsche himself - who is seen by Mann in close connection with the idea of the barbarian side of European identity - includes in his *Birth of Tragedy*, a dialogue about the recipe of happiness between the Frigidian king Midas and the barbarian Silenus. Although Silenus himself is meant to be the very embodiment of the non-European, he can also be seen as a symbol of the hidden, repressed dimension of Europeanism.

As to J.M.G. Le Clézio, as we follow his line of argument, barbarian should be the equivalent to natural or even to savage. Oma, Naja Naja or the author himself are proud to be perceived as savage. (“Moi aussi je Suis un peu sauvage.”: “I myself I am a little bit of a savage”, Le Clézio admits during an interview.) To be more specific, in *Le Chercheur d’or*, the savages are always the others, the non-civilized Alterity, to put it in the European system of reference. If compared for instance to a character like Robinson, the

“savages” do not even try to ape the so-called civilized way of life. On the contrary, they prefer to emulate the other living creatures of the Earth. Their bodies actually belong to the Universe. Therefore they feel themselves outside the humanity and protected against it (Onimus 1994: 130).

## 2. The Marginal Revisited

In spite of current hierarchies and axiologies, the three authors identify themselves as rather marginal. From this standpoint, Mann, Eliade and Le Clézio may be rated as eccentrics, magicians, mad, etc.

At this point we need to be aware of the clear-cut distinction between marginal and wild. The marginal is not necessarily a genuine savage. He rather ended up a savage, and stepped out of the so-called normality. In his own system of values, Le Clézio does not display the defining attributes of the savage. We could rather say that he rejects all the common standards of civilization. A savage is supported and legitimated by a specific culture, while a marginal is a lost and a displaced human being (Onimus, 1994: 130-33).

Some of the protagonists and of the fictitious narrators of Le Clézio's travel writings explicitly assume the values of marginality. When he decides to openly undertake the task of the narrative-author, a first person auctorial stance, the writer himself does the same. Adam Polo, the main character of Le Clézio's first book, is the perfect illustration of the outsider. The great majority of the others are tramps, fugitives, ill-adjusted, outlaws, and savages leaving their lives in the middle of a city.

The most relevant example is young man Hogan, in *Le Livre des fuites*. Young man is the only clue that we are provided with, the only way of identifying the character: a human being reduced to his essence, to the common traits of the species, and subsequently an outsider in the world of civilized Europeans.

The narrative voice follows him everywhere in his journey around the world. The character starts off as the inhabitant of an anonymous Mediterranean town and ends up as the perpetual wanderer in the remotest corners of the world.

Having a strong consciousness of his German identity, Thomas Mann seems to embody the very heart of Europeanism. The center and the periphery of Western identity co-exist inside his run-away identity, which incorporates wilderness. Therefore we may conclude that Mann's personal experience epitomizes the very status of European and Western identity.

As a Romanian born “*Huron*” throughout his entire lifetime, Eliade endeavored to legitimize his own Europeanism. *How can one be a Romanian?* is the key-question that structured both his existence and his work. In Eliade's case, the criticism of Europeanism comes from the speaker of several reputedly exotic languages, the historian of religions, the author of some books about shamanism and of a Ph.D. dissertation about yoga.

Following in the footsteps of his friend Young and of the members of the Eranos circle, Eliade is in search for the hidden roots of universal cultures and civilizations. For him, the Indian civilization is more of an antidote to barbarity rather than the other way around.

## 3. Travel as Hermeneutics

The hermeneutic dimension of traveling is conspicuously emphasized by Mircea Eliade. For him, deciphering meanings is the only proper way to understand the other. According to him, Alterity expresses itself on the level of meanings rather than on the level of facts. Facts affect us not through what they are but through their meaning. For this reason traveling is for Eliade a semiotic adventure: “A primeval forest, never-ending, incomprehensible - this is the eucalyptus

forest that the traveler is crossing on the way to Amritsar” (Eliade a.72).

In Eliade’s journal meanings grasped from experience are transposed visually, translated into iconic symbols: cinematographic and photographic metaphors called visions or simply icons. At a certain point, the writer is talking about the European and the non-European eye. The author contends that tourist adverts rarely feature the most significant characteristics of India, because, and I quote: “The essential can never be captured by statistics and it’s usually avoided by photographers.” Roughly speaking the hermeneutic vocation of his travel journals is striking. “How many Indias are there in fact?” he wonders; as many as we can find for the same so-called cultural topography” (Eliade a. 46).

In the traveling journals of all the three authors there are frequent occasions when writing mirrors writing.

It is common knowledge that certain forms of writing have self-reflecting features and this is the case the case of a re-read or a re-written journal. Eliade, for instance re-read his travel journal and commented upon it, rewriting it as a different journal plus a series of travel articles, firstly printed in Romanian magazines and then collected in one volume (under the title *The Library of the Maharajah*.)

Le Clézio is adding to his travel book *Le Chercheur d’Or* a journal which throughs light upon the genesis of his book *Voyage à Rodrigues*.

Traveling with Quixote, Thomas Mann rereads it and underlines the moments when Cervantes imaginarily stages the reflection upon such binaries as European/non-European, civilized/ barbarian. Mann insists on Cervantes’ option to ascribe the manuscript about Quixote to a non-European fictional author: Cid Hamite Ben Engeli. In this way, Cervantes pretends to read Quixote’s adventures from the viewpoint of a Stranger. The translation of the text from Arabic to

Spanish becomes the metaphorical equivalent of the dialogue between the autocratic identity and the non-European alterity. As far as the adventures of Quixote are being screened from opposite standpoints, the fictitious character is assigned a complex arch-cultural (and meta-European) identity.

A significant episode in Mann’s travel diary accounts for the fate of the More Ricote, the ex-grocer of Sancho Panza’s village.

Exiled from Spain for being a foreigner, he has to return to his native country named Berberia (Barbaria?). Perceived as a barbarian from the European standpoint, the exiled grocer suffers from a very symptomatic nostalgia. He misses Spain badly, perceiving it as his home and as the cradle of his genuine identity. Once more, cultural identity is cross-checked by both Cervantes and Mann. Eventually, the opposition self/ other, the same/ different is questioned and invalidated.

Among the puzzling identities on display in the traveling book re-read by the German author, the character of Cardenio - *the wild man from Sierra Morena* deserves a special attention. To put it shortly, on his way Quixote comes across a disappointed lover who has decided to exile himself in the wilderness of Sierra Morena and mourns his vanished love copying the savage lifestyle. Cervantes fakes seeing Cardenio both as an outsider and as a savage. As a matter of fact, these are the two main attributes of barbarity, in respect to which European identity has been defined during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. At a certain point in the novel, Quixote himself decides to ape Cardenio. In this way, Cervantes provides himself with a fine opportunity to undertake an ironical critique of so-called barbarity. Cardenio is by no means “a genuine savage”. He simply plays the part assigned to the wild man in the European cultural space.

In order to cope with barbarity, the German writer needed a mitigating image:

Quixote - a *Figura* of his own deep, hidden, alterity. As far as Quixote decides to imitate the wild man from Sierra Morrena, mirroring eventually enhances the hermeneutic potential of Mann's reading.

#### 4. Codes of the Dialogue Self/ Other

A special emphasis is being laid by all the three writers on the stereotypes of the Self / Other encounter. Fostered by modern European culture, the repertoire of stereotypes had functioned mainly through linguistic networks and following specific mythical patterns.

On the whole, Eliade, Le Clézio and Mann have operated in convergent ways. They have generally worked on the same lines, unveiling the mythical substance of the Barbarian seen as an Alterity in relation to the European identity. This mythic wildness has profoundly shaped rational and scientific discourses such as Western-formed historiography and ethnography and also fantastic and travel literature, has engendered the stereotype of the good savage in the fiction of the Enlightenment etc.

The Stranger discovered by Eliade in India is radically different from this stereotypical image originated in the European imaginary and circulating mostly through cultural networks: "Maybe Amritsar is going to be one more disappointment, like so many other places and cities of India, places and cities that I have heard too much about, that I have imagined to much about" (Eliade a.73).

The writer is constantly aware of the multiple cultural filters that are screening his personal contacts with the Difference, even with the difference in Nature: the Indian night for instance. He is quite aware that any direct contact with it is impossible and ... incomprehensible: "...it is not the night of Italy or of Romania. To draw nearer it, you must first get rid of Novalis' nights, the nights of the French romantics, or those of the Latin poets'.

And even then, the oriental legend charm of the *1001 Arabian Nights* will still separate you from it. Arabia stretches out between you and the Indian night" (Eliade a.75).

The modern history of the wild man - discovered by colonizers, exalted by the Enlightenment, studied by ethnologists - should be understood as an unfolding of an ancient myth (Bartra, 1994:204). The barbarian was a fixed and tangible phenomenon offering Europeans an extraordinary opportunity to gaze into the mirror of otherness.

Progressively the symbolic image of the barbarian has been transformed into a rational and scientific concept, capable of capturing the otherness of the allegedly non-civilized societies: a mental universe ruled by mythos and opposed to logos.

Eliade concludes that the mythology of barbarity and the myth of the barbarian, in their various forms, have acted as a network of codes, repeatedly interpreting the Western culture. According to him, the sacred could be successfully approached through the stereotypes and the models of cultural mythology. The myth contains various codes with which to interpret Western culture. Due to its metaphoric richness and multiple significances, the myth of the wild man becomes a medium by which the origins of the idea of Western civilization / identity-alterity/ may be interpreted.

During his Indian travels, Eliade currently uses certain mediators to facilitate communication and understanding between himself and the Other: "A crocodile resembles a dragon from my Nibelungian childhood" (Eliade a. 34). Later the author notices that the choices, the likes and dislikes of the travelers are inspired by books rather than reality: more precisely by geographical books and by sentimental novels.

Travel literature is a journey that has the great privilege to grant textual substance and reality to the efforts of transgressing, of going

beyond the monolithic space of identity and of its canonical representations.

What is almost crucial in this respect is the double function adopted by travel literature: the function of discourse (*textual*) and the function of conceptualization (*meta-textual*). In this respect, travel literature resembles fantastic literature that has flourished especially where the centripetal rhetoric of the monolithic Western Europeanism has collapsed.

In the case of Thomas Mann, the meta-textual conceptualizing role is the most poignant while the discursive representation is mediated: entrusted to Cervantes and to his wandering fictitious character.

The discursive function is, however, prevailing on Le Clézio's case. Midway between the two, Mircea Eliade's works illustrate a more balanced recipe.

Traveling is generally the representation of a world of order or of disorder: an excursion into the chaos or the counter-order of extra-culture. As far as space and time are being reinterpreted, the result of this re-organization is the birth of chronotop typical for travel. Le Clézio, for instance, declares bluntly: "It is in time, not in space that I am traveling." (Le Clézio d. 35). Traveling with Quixote and through him with chivalry novels allow Mann to descend to successive temporal levels. Spatial distances between the familiar, the European, the civilized, on the one hand, and the unfamiliar, the barbaric etc. on the other, become the perfectequivalents of a journey in time. The outcome of this is a transfer in time - in the European historical past of a reality usually perceived as mainly spatial: cultural difference.

In Eliade's case, the ontological passages in space and the travel in eternity, in time, belong to the same chronotope. He dismisses the categories of time and space engendering a peculiar travel chronotope. In Eliade's travel narrative, the discursive level is more substantial than in Thomas Mann's case,

where emphatically displayed conceptualization is the dominating element.

The covert semantic affinity between the other as the repressed or forgotten, and the other as the foreign or strange becomes overt in the transformation of the forgotten into a mysterious marvelous or monstrous object. The barbaric side of the European past, suffocated by the conventions of normality and rationality, the Alterity banished by each of us in the hidden sides of our identity, surfaces and takes a tangible shape. In this way a representable space is born, alongside with an exotic, geographical, ethnical, non-European foreign Alterity. The image of the Other is a cover (a masque) for all that is repressed, forgotten or made absent, that which was or could have been a part of our cultural experience.

If we switch to a meta-textual level, Eliade is working towards annihilating the opposition between the central and the peripheral and between the past and the present. His travel diary subverts the validity of fundamental categories like appropriateness, extravagance, adventure, hallucination, sorcery, and para-science. Marguerite Yourcenar astutely detects Mann's efforts to redefine all throughout his works, two allegedly contrasting categories, the humanist and the mythological, building a bridge between them, underlining the links between them. A quotation from the writer's travelogue confirms and completes her hypothesis: "It is *the multilateral not the unique* that designs the future" (Mann 280).

In their travel writings the three authors undertake a convergent critic of the travel writing itself as a literary genre. Mann does it by resorting to the reading of Cervantes, adding a pair of *hermeneutical glasses* to be able to accurately narrate and to understand his experience.

Le Clézio implicitly questions the picaresque recipe as his travel writings are recreating the mythical itinerary of famous

wanderers as well undertaking a criticism of the stereotypes of rambling.

There are sections of Eliade's text openly criticizing the genre itself, because it traditionally records facts rather than interpretations. Author of a hermeneutic journal, Eliade is undertaking a criticism of the very idea of tourism as an itinerary in a land of events and of objects rather than of meanings:

“Travel journals can sometimes make admirable books. But those few facts, maybe even those tens of facts that every traveler comes into direct contact with doesn't really mean much. They rarely have any positive significance. They are never, at least almost never, decisive. How do hundred or one thousand facts enhance the understanding of an extremely diverse country such as India?” (Eliade a.15).

Or, in a different context: “I don't really believe in travel literature. You can write in so many ways about the Orient. It really comes down to how much you are ready to uncover and to the quantity of facts that you are determined conceal” (Eliade a. 18).

All travel writings have a subversive dimension in that they pursue the aim of creating alternative worlds as well as making up for a frustration resulting from cultural constraints. In the three authors' texts, the relationship homo- versus hetero-cultural is never shaped as a clear-cut polar model, but *acted out* as a constant transgression of the boundaries between present and absent, true and false. It is this very image of ambivalence that makes the travel writing a conceptual force, disturbingly interfering with the models produced by a culture in order to come to terms with its “Other”.

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