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A POETICS OF UTOPIA

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In search of another proof it was not hard to find it in Skinner's utopia, the fictional expression of behavioural engineering:

“Each of us has interests which conflict with the interests of everybody else. That's our original sin, and it can't be helped. Now, 'everybody else' we call 'society', It's a powerful opponent, and it always wins. Oh, here and there an individual prevails for a while and gets what he wants. Sometimes he storms the culture of a society and changes it slightly to his own advantage. But society wins in the long run, for it has the advantage of numbers and of age. Many prevail against one, and man against a baby. Society attacks early, when the individual is helpless. It enslaves him almost before he has tested freedom. The 'ologies' will tell you how it's done. Theology calls it building a conscience or developing a spirit of selflessness. Psychology calls it the growth of the super-ego.”
(*Walden Two*, 1962, p. 104).

1

Utopia and the Social Imaginary

“Pour bien distinguer les problèmes de l'imagination et ceux de la perception, pour montrer ensuite comment ce qu'on imagine commande ce qu'on perçoit, pour donner ainsi à l'imagination la place qui lui revient dans l'activité humaine: la place première, il est peu de mots plus appropriés que le mot dur...Les mots *dur*, *dureté*, apparaissent aussi bien dans un jugement de réalité que dans une métaphore morale, révèlent ainsi très simplement, les deux fonctions du langage: transmettre des significations objectives précises – suggères valeurs plus ou moins méthaphoriques.”

G. Bachelard, *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté*

Within the perspective of the socio-human sciences a definition of utopia implies a polysemantic and pluridimensional treatment, practically infinite taxonomic possibilities and a flexibility that parallels historical becoming. As a product of the collective imaginary (our first acceptance of the concept), utopia will share with the other components of the imaginary (dreams, myths, reveries, illusions) the indefiniteness of a variable contiguity between unconscious processes and rationalisation. As a creation of the individual mind (the second acceptance), “literary” utopia partakes of a privileged field of the imaginary, where the image, by entering the space of the text, acquires new characteristics. An exhaustive discussion of the problems involved by the structure and working of the imaginary is beyond the scope of our research. However, as the triad utopia-ideology-myth should necessarily be assigned to a common origin (the operations of the imaginary) our excursion into the forging operations that occur in the interaction between the imaginary and reality is based on the suggestion of R. Alleau who claims that the study of myths, rites and symbols implies an active

participation in their existential genesis rather than their treatment as purely linguistic mechanisms or conceptual categories¹.

Within the many-sided balance between the reality and the imaginary, between what is real and what is represented, the bulk of representations that form the content of the imaginary, the result of our contact with reality cannot be the subject of scientific search for causally based determination or regularities. It was S. Freud, the practicing physician, who, subsequent to the study of challenging "symptoms" of character disorder, trespassed on the land of the unknown, defying the border between "real" and "unreal" between the actual and the illusory. In his study of the mechanisms of the unconscious, Freud revealed the undeniable constructive role of images, their *symbolic* function, and their power to penetrate the areas of the most profound workings of the imagination. With special reference to dreams, Freud sees in the apparent liberty of images the possible claim for the hermeneutical power of whatever "latent" whenever the body (locus or stage) is conceived as free from the physiological conditioning.

Freud reinforced the role of the image as an active agent of *poiesis* and redimensioned an intricate relation that will be approached by C. G. Jung in terms of a correlation that eschews linear causality or separability. Jung's insights are a step towards "healing" Freud's "repressions" and another stage in defining the psychic pluralism that underlies the archetypal matrices, capable of producing images that belong to two mythical regimes (*animus* and *anima*). Jung's well-known notions of "synchronicity" and "psychoid", relying on a social *Urground* that implies a mutual (non-spatial) meeting place between the observer and the observed, define an *imaginary* that includes the symbolizing and the symbolized. As G. Durand infers: "Il n'y a donc plus seulement là de coupure entre *res externso* (chose étendue) et *res cogitans* (chose pensante) comme chez Descartes, non seulement, comme chez Kant, postulation d'un sujet transcendantal" auquel échapperait la réalité "en soi", le noumène, mais bien position d'un *Unus mundus*

¹ R. Alleau, *La science des symboles*, 1976, p. 53.

transcendental certes, mais ou la réalité "en soi" peut être douée selon diverses "formes symboliques" (1996, 77).

Most recent anatomo-psychological findings as well as research in physics could only testify to something that, at the dawn of Western rationalism, Plato knew quite well: imagination, sensibility and instinct, follow their own laws. Socrates' maieutics found in the mythical mode of apprehending reality truths that avoid logical interpretation, the result of experiencing a to-and-fro movement that transgresses what is obvious and yet obscure. The way from the lived experience, the "deformation" of this experience and the systems of representation is most often self-deceptive, meandering among redundancies, unexpected symmetries and variations. Ever since Plato the epistemological speculation oriented towards the polarity subject-object has been the concern of philosophy, which has claimed the hegemony of discourse in this respect by virtue of the legitimacy conferred by its internal history. Other branches of knowledge, including literature (the mimetic activity...) have held a secondary role. It is the task of the philosopher to continuously question and re-examine our image of ourselves as subjects who take in the object and work upon external impulses.

Any consideration on the imagination implies fundamental questioning about the interconnectedness between the experiencing self and the experienced world. Since the direction of any "experiencing" is inherently towards bridging the gap between "sense" and "understanding", the sum of representations that go beyond the limits imposed by experience (Kant's *creative imagination*) produces a partial break with reality. These representations can be conceived as a route along which the object is received, assimilated, modelled, through the agency of the impulses of the subject during successive stages of its accommodation to reality. Immersed in social life, the individual is subject to a dialectical process, in which the work of the unconscious and the imaginary encounters diverse manifestations of collective conduct that decisively impinge upon the order and the coherence of the representations, by way of including identity and alterity, global visions, collective codes, with regard to hope, expectations, anxieties.

Thus, the uniqueness of the sensorial experience acquires a plurality of representations that accounts for an uncircumscribable ego. When viewed as an inherent product of a dialectical process the contents of the imagination can no longer be defined as a mere store of transposed realities, but as a continuous, ever-shifting, intermingling of subjective drives and rationalisation, a union of semiotics and logic, of semantics and syntax.

The phenomenology of symbols as theorised, among others by G. Bachelard, R. Cailliois, P. Ricoeur and J. J. Wunenburger situates the imagery partaking of the collective imaginary within a network of symbolic forms, which are asserted as the result of a primordial manifestation of the human psyche. According to this approach, the system of representations involve interplay of images-signs and images-symbols, an interplay in which the latter bear meanings and values that add new dimensions to the perceived reality. The symbolic image directs beyond the significance, it is an intrinsic link between the literal and the figurative. While by its literal meaning the image acquires the universality, the figurative function opens the way for the unlimited intrusion of subjectivity. Thus the symbolic image is both constant and relative, it internalises the exteriority of reality and projects the interiority of the psyche outside. The symbol “represents in a certain manner, enveloping at the same time; it forges, dismembering” (Chevalier, 25) because as Wunenburger puts it “l’image n’est donc pas autre chose que le concept, mais elle en est l’étoffe, la matière première” (1979, 170). The result of the workings of the imagination can be either rationalised into a coherent body of philosophical, ideological, historical network of concepts or it may preserve its spontaneity manifested in the poetic flow of images in which causality disappears during the game of motifs and symbols representing, on another level, our position within the whole of experience.

After dismissing Kant’s *reproductive imagination* as well as Bergson’s continuum of consciousness which means the rendering

absolute of the memory G. Bachelard² emphasises the decisive difference between “the image perceived” and “the image created” and claims that the imagination acts as an organising principle that augments the values of reality. Bachelard assigns to images a pertinent coherence, similar to the one of the experimental reasoning, foretelling some recent findings in the fields of physics and psychology that trespass the positivistic borders between “exact sciences” and “inexact sciences.” “En fait, Bachelard a ainsi été pour nous le premier reconciliateur, le premier scientifique qui s’est aperçu que, s’il y a bien un certain ordre méthodologique, logique et épistémologique de la science. il n’y en a pas moins un ordre de la non-science, un ordre de la poétique, de la rêverie, de l’imaginaire...” (G. Durand, 1996, 54-55). In a quasi-historical treatment of the families of poetic images engendered by the four natural elements, Bachelard provides essential proofs as concerns the mythical power of images, their capacity of revealing, or rather creating a direct ontology. The imagination is *forming* images that have an “insondable fond onirique” (1957, 47) rather than *deforming* in its interconnection with reality. Thus, J. P. Sartre’s³ psychological model of imagination as a source of error and falsehood, a “shadow of the object”, a “néanty” is replaced by a phenomenology of daydreaming (Bachelard opposes the nobility of the creative “rêverie” to the banality of “rêve”) which is, according to Bachelard, a psychoanalytical activity different from psychoanalysis. When he states that “l’image poétique est un soudain relief de psychisme” (1957, 15), Bachelard comes close to some theses of *Gestaltpsychologie*. The appearance of the image is the result of a new synthesis. “Mais la vie de l’image est toute dans sa fulgurance, dans ce fait qu’une image est un dépassement de toutes les données de la sensibilité. (1957, 15) When he states that the new image must be assumed “with enthusiasm”, Bachelard implicitly asserts the role

² G. Bachelard, *La poétique de l’espace*, P.U.F., Paris, 1974, *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté* Corti, Paris, 1948, *La terre et les rêveries du repos*, 1946.

³ See: Gilbert Durand, *Structurille antropologice ale imaginariului*, 1977, pp 26-30.

of the subject in the symbolic function of the image. The passing from the literal meaning to the figurative one is essentially a participative activity during which the subject “fills in” “the absence.” Thus, the subject assumes the function of an actor rather than a spectator and plays his part in the reciprocal modelling. “By the symbolic experience, man discovers that images are not only the mark of his will, but also the signs of something beyond the sensible datum” (Wunenburger, 1998, 32)

In his turn, R. Caillois⁴ speaks about the images as a “poetic” transposition of reality and performs extraordinary feats in finding correspondences and homologies in a functional analysis of the relationship between the image and the sensible world. Whether for Bachelard there is no causal relationship between the data of the consciousness and the new image, Caillois starts from the premise of the existence of a universal criss-cross of reflections and redundancies that comprises both the world of the imaginary and the world of living beings and inanimate things: “A vrai dire, entre les sensations, les sentiments, les abstractions, les choses, les êtres, les idées, les mouvements, il est toujours possible de découvrir une ressemblance que ratifie plus ou moins l’imagination. Le plaisir réside dans la reconnaissance de l’analogie” (1958, 84). Caillois’ unorthodox and sometimes puzzling approach is a plea for universal harmony in which nature and the human psyche converge in defining a homogeneous, rational, and finite universe. By positing the existence of an all-embracing order, of the unity and continuity of the world, Caillois seems to have no room for whatever arbitrary or disruptive. Caught in the symbolic interaction, the act of representation is apparently conditioned from without and the power of imagination, of dreams, social myths and reveries is reduced to an endless game of “resemblances” within an ontologically constituted order. The activity of the spirit is paralleled by the forms devised by matter; the subject does but reflects the rules of combinatory patterns.

⁴ R. Caillois, *Eseuri despre imaginație*, 1975, *Le mythe et l’homme*, 1938, *Images, images...*, 1966, *Les jeux et les hommes : le masque et le vertige*, 1958

Caillois’ view is, nevertheless, far from both a limiting determinism and from the indefiniteness of some present-day epistemologies. He finds in the “excess” of some manifestations of the imaginary, in the imagery of celebrations, festivals, madness, violent outbursts, the real power to overthrow certain data of reality, and thus to enrich them. It is in such instances that the “subversive” function of the imaginary is prone to combine affective and cognitive activities and produce alterity. Since we see in the balance between affectivity and cognition the rationale for circumscribing the utopian imaginary, some of Caillois’ insights offer valuable clues for comprehending both the circumstances favouring the appearance of the utopian discourse and the consistency of the utopian imagery.

Through their structuring and content, the literary utopian texts anticipate relations of absolute or pseudo-absolute freedom transcending the existing order. It is a rebellious act, because, not necessarily a-historically anchored into timeless and spaceless formalism, the text is involved in laying bare an ideology that is aesthetically called into question, if not destroyed. By thematising a wide range of wishes, dreams (or nightmares) in the construction of an imaginary society, utopian literature resorts to a set of practices that underlie its formal aspect.

If placed against the background of the Renaissance, the birth of the utopian discourse is a consequence of the new role of the ludic and ludicrous, of the gratuitous and the monstrous in the mythical consciousness and it parallels the reassessment of sacredness in a world impregnated with images and symbols. Under such circumstances, the utopian imagery, deeply rooted in the myth of perfection and absolute bliss, engenders works and can be approached in terms of a literary discourse. In its turn, the utopian imagination, the genitor of the utopian fiction itself is itself altered due to ineluctable evolution in the perception of the balance between imagination and reason. When regarded as a relationship of the various forms of the imaginary, this evolution may be conceived as a continuous undermining of myth by ideology, that is, a route from the prevalence of affectivity to the supremacy of the cognitive function of the imaginary.

The relation subject-object that has been asserted as basic to any hermeneutics of the imaginary acquires the status of an “epistemological breakthrough” in the context of the “natural attitude” brought about by the clash between the relativism and irrationalism that characterises modern times. (Of course, the concept “epistemological breakthrough” is inspired by Althusser’s employment of the term “epistemological breakthrough” with reference to the gap between Marx’s early and mature writings. The concept was coined by G. Bachelard in his work *The Philosophy of No*). By somehow oversimplifying the Platonic *logos* and *mythos* for the purposes of his thesis, G. Durand⁵ suggests their ever-growing closeness in the renovation of a general holistic epistemology. In his assertion of the existence of the *new gnosis*⁶ (only in the sense of total knowledge), Durand evokes Bachelard’s works *The Philosophy of No* and *The New Scientific Spirit*⁷ as first evidence that the great physicists at the beginning of the century (Einstein, Planck, Pauli) started subverting the previous epistemological consensus. Durand resorts to new proofs in the respect and, operating with notions such as “temporal symmetry” (Einstein’s paradox verified by the quantum mechanics) “the dislocation of the phenomenon” (proved by the undulatory mechanics and later by Heisenberg’s “relation of uncertainty”), “non-separability” (Bernard d’Espagnat) postulates the existence of a trichotomy past/future/elsewhere as a substitute for the dichotomy past/future. Elsewhere acts as a *tertium datur* which Durand applies to the analysis of the ubiquity of the symbolic reference, in which the space of the symbolising, its “identity” of

⁵ G. Durand, *Introduction à la methodologie*, ch. “Épistémologie du signifié”, 47-81.

⁶ G. Durand alludes to R. Ruyer’s work *La Gnose de Princeton*, Fayard, 1974; Alain Besançon considers the *gnosis* as a component part of the European cultural model of all times and ideology as the modern equivalent of the *gnosis*, of course, the equivalent of the “evil” (physical matter, i. e. science) side of the Gnostic dualism; see: A. Besançon, *Originile intelectuale ale leninismului*, Humanitas, București, 1993.

⁷ G. Bachelard, *La Philosophie du non*, P. U. F., 1940, *Le Nouvel Esprit scientifique*, P. U. F., 1934.

localisation, is consistent with the identity conferred by the symbolised, “the identity of the non-separability.” Hence, he posits the existence of a double identity.

One more proof may be added to Durand’s “meta-physical” assumptions. Thus, S. Lupasco⁸ has laid the scientific basis for the existence of a dynamic logic of the contradictory that further denies the schizoid dichotomous thinking of Western man. Using Planck’s quantum theory models, Lupasco formulated the theory of the T principle (2000, 10), according to which each phenomenon is *associated* with its anti-phenomenon; the experience of the subject is the experience of the logic of the non-contradiction. T unifies “e” and non “e”, there is a universal interdependence, a trialectic dynamism that leads to the “dilution of doubt” (2000, 21). Consequently there is no metaphysical “one”, neither a unique level of reality.

In the spirit of his approach, Durand places the semiotic relationship within a larger anthropological matrix and, continuously aware of the partiality of his thesis, uses it with special reference to the “return of the myth.” Nevertheless, the new concepts furnished by modern physics, the reconsideration of causality, the ubiquity of the object’s spatial co-ordinates, the reversibility of time account for the “deposition” of the phenomenon and the implicit reformulation of identity: “[Cette] dis-location du phénomène, toute comme sa co-existence de non-séparabilité, son enracinement par symetrie dans ‘l’ailleurs’ incident a repenser la notion d’identité, de ce “ principe d’identité” qui est la dogme de toute l’épistémologie et de la philosophieclassique depuis Aristote” (1996, 62).

P. Ricoeur defines the function of utopia in terms of the dialectic nowhere-somewhere: “To be here, *Da-sein*, I must also be able to be nowhere. There is a dialectic of *Dasein* and the nowhere” (1986, 310). In her critique of the “Cartesian epistemology of nowhere” S. Bordo expresses the ubiquity characteristic of the

⁸ See S. Lupasco, *L’expérience microphysique et la pensée humaine*, Paris, P. U. F., 1941; *Principiul antagonismului și logica energiei. Prolegomene la o știință a contradicției*, Ed. Fundației “Ștefan Lupășcu”, Iași, 2000, trad. și postfața de Vasile Sporic; *Les trois matières*, Paris, Julliard, 1960; also see Basarab Nicolescu, *Nous, la particule et le monde*, Paris, Le Mail, 1985.

postmodern condition in terms of an epistemology of “everywhere.” Thus, in the Cartesian “nowhere”, “[t]he body-conceptualised as the site of epistemological limitation, as that which fixes the knower in time and space and therefore situates and relativizes perception and thought-requires transcendence if one is to achieve the view from nowhere, God’s eye-view.” Considering the postmodern movement within and between the bodies Bordo adds a new dimension to the dialectic somewhere-nowhere: “What sort of body is it, that is free to change its shape and location at will, which can become anyone and travel everywhere? If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then, the postmodern body is no body at all.”⁹ The dissolution of the ego as a consequence of the relativisation of the dichotomy objectivity-subjectivity makes R. Barthes ask himself “Quel corps? Nous en avons plusieurs. Le moi se confond avec un ça balourd, fibreux, pelucheux, effiloché, véritable houppelande de clown” (1957, p. 182). Consequently, the possibility of creating a sense of community disappears. Thus, the postmodern body becomes a “dream of limitless multiple embodiments.”¹⁰

Considered within the regime of images, the positing of the continuous stream of the dialectical relation between “here” and “there” and between “now” and “then” induces the idea of limitation. This permeability, the poetic free play of the imagination, is subdued by spatio-temporal co-ordinates; in the case of the utopian

⁹ S. Bordo’s considerations on the postmodern condition are quoted by J. Burwell, *Notes on Nowhere*, 1997, p. 128.

¹⁰ For an interesting debate on the ubiquitousness of the body, see: J. Starobinsky, *Melancolie, nostalgie, ironie, ch. “Scurtă istorie a conștiinței corpului”* (p. 176-196). A medical doctor himself, Starobinsky starts, naturally, from Descartes, and presents a history of the physiological and para-physiological treatment of the body. Starobinsky quotes from Ribot’s book *Les maladies de la personnalité*: “The ego exists only on condition it varies continuously” (p. 182). The ubiquitousness is positive as embedded in non-verbal or in pre-verbal and acquires a poetic function due to the irrepressible play of metaphors. In his comments on Freud, he infers that “[o]nly at the price of abandoning the body the unconscious becomes the owner of a language and the producer of palimpsests [...] offered to an activity of deciphering” (p. 189)

imagination, the restriction imposed by the projection in space (inside the limitless time there exists a “somewhere” and “nowhere”) where perfection has been attained, parallels a limited temporal dimension because of the intrusion of the actual time, the “now”, that acts as a necessary model for the timelessness of “then.”

However, a temporal dimension is to be added to a nowhere that is equally denied any locatedness in time. The utopian aporia limited-unlimited is expressive in terms of both somewhere vs. nowhere and “now” vs. “then.” In his definition of the “universal”, Hegel, unlike Descartes, does not enquire about the location of the subject of consciousness, but about a meaning of “now” as for example in the dialectic “night” vs. “day”: “The now that is Night is *preserved*, i. e. it is treated as what it professes to be, as something that is *not*. The now does indeed preserve itself, but as something that also is not Day, in other words, as a *negative* in general...A simple thing of this kind which is through negation, which is neither This or That, a *not-This*, and is with equal indifference this as well as That – such a thing we call *universal*.”¹¹

At a time when all universals have become suspect, when the questioning of moral categories is a commonplace (what does to be good or to act badly mean, if the Good and Bad no longer exist?) when the subject is posited as either *central*, the source of all meaning, an autarchic ego or, on the contrary, it is decentred, and proclaimed constitutive of the material world, the “classical” dichotomy subject-object is called into question and free scope is given to the allegations about the disappearance of both ideology and utopia. The shift of the utopian impulse, its passing from outside the system into a questionable “global ideology” or into a form of social critique (that is, in terms of congruence and non-congruence, the vanishing of individual differences into the “wholeness if identification”) allows for further inferences concerning the historical paradigms of both ideology and utopia. Marx’s *alienation* has been replaced by modern man’s *fragmentation*; collective aspirations are

¹¹ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, quoted by T. Docherty, *Alterities*, 1996, p. 4.