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### **On the road between pages with a multitude of strangers, and me among them**

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It seems to be nowadays a commonplace to say that we are our next strangers, this means strangers towards ourselves. As children, we discover parts of our body, we see for the first time our face in the mirror, we experience all that as something both familiar and strange, and only after that as something of our own. The process of socialization – seen from a perspective of an average individual, living in a modern city – helps us to get acquainted with a large palette of Others. We get to know both figures of the *alter*, as the familiar Other, as our privileged dialogue partner, and figures of the *alius*, as the really strange stranger, as the uncanny Other. The process of individuation, which follows in the ontogenesis the process of socialization, makes us acquainted with the abyss of our own self. And later, as adults, we feel able to turn such forms of fracture, experienced during childhood and adolescence, into masks that we are obliged to use in our daily practices. They can even be masks of creation, like the heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa. (By the way: Fernando Pessoa himself, as a signature with his real name, might have been just one more mask, not necessarily the most achieved one).

We seem, as adults, to have interiorized former experiences, facing both the *alter* and the *alius*. We could say that they struggle now among each other inside us. Such situation is a common pattern of our experience of interior strangeness before we get acquainted with exterior strangeness. Along this process, we build our images in endless configurations. They have to be problematic, critical, unusual, if they are supposed to supply us with stimulating material for our creative plans. In other words: Why should images of the stranger, as well as experiences with strangers, be felt as threatening ones from the beginning? It must not be so, at least in times and



places of current city life in peace, if we grow up within an open-minded human environment. City life is exciting, so are the strangers we meet there. Moreover, an image of a stranger can be a permanent reason for fascination, if the conditions of possibility are given to include it in an open horizon of understanding.

The image of the stranger may yet become threatening if coped with any sort of identity obsession, from the individual or collective sort. This happens because such identity obsessions provoke in most cases a closure of that horizon of understanding, letting it turn into an arena of misunderstanding. Reading the Other is, in such situations of closure, no more an open adventure on the wire between discovery and risk, but rather a dull, uniform, self-reproductive task. The horizon is also no more one of understanding, but of self-defense. From that reactive platform to aggression and violence there is no more than a small step.

If we look for a shelter (an in many occasions we simply need a shelter, or a friendly shoulder), we must provide that such shelter keeps a door, at least a window open, otherwise it rapidly turns into a prison. And if we keep being free, according to our eccentric human nature always looking for new information or impressions to be written on our reservoir of experience, we also keep being critical towards prejudices. We know too well that a prejudice is no more than the result of a blatant inability to set communicative bridges towards the Other, correspondingly to recognize his or her merits, his or her particularities. The problem of the stranger is therefore a matter of receptivity.

We read the Other, but we also read ourselves. And within each further reading, contradictions and paradoxes become more and more visible, yet disclosing connections with aspects that we can only suspect, these being therefore invisible – or rather, as we could say, *protovisible*. As we know, visibility does not mean necessarily clearness. We always carry with ourselves a fullness of forms, of masks, of impressions and pictures, of experienced or imagined otherness. The wider we keep the spectrum, the smaller is the danger that we build hostile images of the Other, most of all out of experiences with the *alius*. Diversity keeps us from one-sided clichés. The roots of any form of barbarism always lie in a dangerously narrow sense of the meaning that we produce, for ourselves and for the others.



And how do we learn to deal with diversity, if not through literature and art? Literature provides us with that wide spectrum of characters, many of them said to be bigger than life, in any case able to extend our organs of perception *ad infinitum*. I must say that I cannot speak for the generations that are born with e-books. My individual room, as an adolescent, was situated next to the home library. The limitations of the experience space, due to the Portuguese dictatorship in the fifties, found a lot of compensation between book covers. We could read almost everything, because the regime trusted upon the gap between the small cultivated elite and the non-alphabetized people. Reading had therefore to be, in the second decade of my life, for me experience enough.

Perhaps we should reformulate the sentence which says that an image is more worth than thousand words. As a matter of fact, does a single word not provoke thousand associations too, correspondingly images? Discussing this issue in my university courses, a student gave as an example the word LOVE and the myriads of images associated with it. All the academic audience understood her immediately. We understand this immediately. And yet there is also hardly a word that may lead to more frustrations and misunderstandings than the word LOVE. Literature nourishes itself in a considerable part out of this insight. But human sciences, for instance psychoanalysis, come to similar conclusions: if we listen to Freud in his «*Civilization and its Discontents*», we soon recall not only the deceiving and deceptions connected with love in spite of its sublime moments, but also the *fata morgana* dwelling in the Christian dogma that tells the believers to love the Other, and further, to love the own enemies.

We know that even if we succeed in doing so, we are lying to ourselves, or even worse, we are violating ourselves. And why is this so? Because in doing so, we are erasing, or trying to erase, the necessary distance, within the space of appearance, from which we become able to understand, to respect, and if it is the case, to love the Other. (I would not like to be misunderstood: there may be situations of *coup de foudre*; but if they are bound to become stable relationships, they must go through a process of mutual knowledge and understanding too).

Our capacity of handling with insecurity, with difference, with contradiction, with ambiguity, with strangeness, can be intensively promoted through literature. But here we must care about the way we do it. If we functionalize what we read, for instance in order to quote it in academic papers or before an audience, we may be jeopardizing the chances of knowing the Other, because by doing



so we shall be subjecting it under a dialectic on means and ends. (Again I ask not to be misunderstood: In our academic jobs such procedures are too often unavoidable, but this is not a reason why they should not be recognized as functionalistic). In an interview about his researches on Hitler's private library, Timothy Ryback said that the German dictator only used the matters that he read in his books in order to legitimate his perverted deeds through quotations. This could be an extreme but significant example of the assertion above. Books do not make us better without a process of self-distance.

From literature we also experience processes of identification. Which characters are sympathetic to us, which roles we often play secretly, resembling to the figures under whose skin we feel easy to slipper? But precisely because this is a process, we soon realize how differences and discrepancies become clearer and clearer, and therefore we become strange to them, and also a stranger towards ourselves.

To promote that capacity of handling with strangeness means to approach literature with the open attitude of purposelessness. We do it for its own sake, incidentally in the same way as we should approach a strange face. We are aware of all the light-years of knowledge and experience, all the black holes that lie in the great history of mankind, but in spite of that we keep trying to build small narratives upon our experience of reading, of facing the Other. We are looking for meaning instead of (immediate) love, for insight instead of deceiving images of happiness. We are cultivating a mental space that promotes the ability of living with ambivalence. All strangers have several *Doppelgänger* within us. Literature and art have shown this to us since the most primitive times. Freud has just asserted it. Some writers handled genially with this insight. Pessoa once wrote that he felt to be just one as a prison. As we know, he escaped from that prison by creating several heteronyms.

Walking with our own *Doppelgänger*, we keep struggling with him, or her, or even them. But we also escape from the prison of identity obsessions. And at the end of the road, we may feel happy because we breathe freely, without having been pursuing happiness, or any form of essentialism, as a primary purpose. And most important of all, we make peace with the strangers inside and outside us, because on our way we have learned how to measure and to handle with distance, with mediation, before we arrive at the threshold of our home.