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A handful of sand: Looking for a lost paradigm?

Teresa Salema – Chair of the Portuguese PEN Centre

Vice-Chair of the Writers for Peace Committee

Modernity has a large spectrum, in time and space. It may include late modernity and post-modernity as variations, or reading protocols, of the same pattern. One of the main characteristics of such a pattern could consist in a sort of absence of previous determination, leaving free space for tracing individual paths. This would mean that we are able to see in many manifestations of modernity also the lacunas left among the paths of greater mobility and dynamics. But is it really so? If we look back upon the long history of Modern Ages and the first manifestations of what Hannah Arendt called pathos of novelty, we may draw a line throughout five centuries, throughout the attempts to follow one's mind and faculty of judgment, among and against all kind of barriers and lianas of authority, hierarchy, traditions, prejudice. Therefore, we may also say that modernity is a permanent state of latent our outburst crisis.

As a matter of fact, we need to differentiate among a lot of aspects. In this second decade of the 21th century, in which we live, we might unfold, so to say, a fan of innumerable stories within History. They are both universal (since the anthropological structure of humankind has hardly changed) and local (with their visual outlines but also sounds, textures, flavours, tastes, culture patterns). That means, within our individual protocol of reading History, we are continuously drawing lines of *grandes et petites histoires*, and also discovering how they are interwoven among themselves. Looking into each one of such microcosms, we also might disclose expressions of free will against conventions, giving us a possible plot out of such clash situations that help shaping successful narratives.



Let me put things clear: Whether such processes are carried out in full conscientiousness or not – or not all the times – we are always tracing our own story within History. If we write fiction, we slip under the skin of our characters by bringing them into life – otherwise, they will not be living characters but outlined shadows. If we write essays, we unfold our line of thought around concerns that we personally share upon any object of analysis. Therefore, we are always sharing the world with others, on a very basic level. We are permanently exfoliating ourselves within the world, as well as incorporating parts of it. But should we remain merely on this ground, which has yet a huge degree of openness and allows not only sustainable ways of reading and acting, but also considerable poetic chances?

Modernity means mobility too, as we know too well. In crisis scenarios, we are forced to remain mobile, even if we have a secure job. I mean hereby a protean kind of mobility, able to create forms of empathy and solidarity, beginning with the availability to listen to others. Moreover, in our age of communication, we have access to all kinds of scenarios without getting up from our working chair. But as well as for creating our fictive characters, we need not only a full documentation and research about a topic, but also a full life inside these characters.

We have to experience the whole meaning of sharing, before choosing which step might be our next, both in literature and in real life.

In his reflections about the essence of beauty, Friedrich Schiller analyzed five situations of helping a man who had become a victim of robbery and lied wounded on the edge of a road. The first four situations showed people acting out of a genuine will to help, but still displaying different kinds of secondary motivation and interest. The only kind of beautiful act was therefore, according to Schiller, the last one, as an example of an action carried out of a spontaneity that meant not precisely a real absence of motivations, but most of all an impulse born within the situation. This leaves in a second plan the dialectics of means and ends, because the gesture of the helping hand takes over the whole picture. No matter how helping somebody else, in this case a stranger, would bring trouble into the daily life of the one whose hand was being reached to the wounded, such a gesture was simply drawn without asking further questions, and therefore providing the scene with an absolute character. Later, Schiller characterized such an attitude as graceful. Furthermore, in a letter written to a friend he wondered whether the Christian religion



could be the only one which deserved to be called aesthetical. This means surely a form of idealization of the character of Jesus, after whom the Pietistic tradition created the conception of the «beautiful soul». We may even trace a biblical influence in Schiller's description of the five scenes of helping the wounded man, leading to find out which one could be considered as aesthetical. But we must also say that Schiller did not conceive an unhistorical theory of beauty, since such perfect and fulfilled situations never can be programmed and cannot be considered but as ephemeral and absolute. The beautiful soul, he wrote in his essay about grace and dignity, has no other chance than becoming sublime in situations of affect, urgency, necessity, pain and death.

«Does God judge us by appearances? I suspect that He does». By quoting W.H. Auden at the beginning of her volume about Thinking, so to say as the first degree of the life of the mind, Hannah Arendt did not want to hurt any religious feelings, but only to draw the reader's attention upon our worldly condition. Under this very condition we stand every minute before the decision of keeping or sharing material and immaterial things. This is not a matter of consuming in order to be happy – whatever each of us may understand under the volatile concept of happiness – but simply of understanding the difference between use and exchange values.

By the same token, we have to go a step further. This means taking into account not only material, exchangeable goods or unique objects that may bring colour into our lives, but also the wholeness of materialized ideas. These ones can be perceived as a link between the visible realm and the invisible domains that exist and take shape and existence when we communicate, act and create. Conceiving therefore the world as a huge mosaic full of familiar and uncanny regions, of delight and dread, we cannot but begin realizing that openness towards such a mosaic could already be a first degree of sharing. But this is not enough.

If we try to shed a contextualizing light upon the examples mentioned above, we realize that the biblical intertextuality of Schiller's aesthetic considerations not only integrates topics of Ancient and New Testament, but mostly roots in the tradition of an ancient culture, according to patterns which prescribe the duty to share our possessions with relatives, friends and strangers, acknowledged as such. We still experience this in many countries, correspondingly in rural regions. The subjacent thought could be thus formulated: What Mother Nature has given to us is to be shared.



On the opposite side, modern urban culture has been built in the last three centuries upon a basis of individuals who earn their living and rely therefore primarily on the result of their work. This creates forms of ontological security but existential anxiety, as Anthony Giddens has put it. The numerous glosses about individual spleen and solipsism in literature and art, in human and social sciences can be read both as a brand or a stigma of modernity itself. Moreover, since the modern human condition seems to have the face of a magazine cover, with fancy clothes but sad eyes foretelling a tragic «Dorian Grayish» aging, its representations seem to lie on the opposite side of the socializing life of traditional, tribal cultures.

Since Freud, however, we are also aware of the double-bind of freedom and neurosis, the later seen as incapacity of the ego to endure the free times and spaces of each individual path. This is also why many modern individuals try to compensate such moments of emptiness with full agendas and meticulous routines, as if they lived within a huge tribe of alter egos, somehow repressed or at least troubled by an unconscious or untold sense of guilt. The glass-bell motive has also been too often glossed in all sorts of works which deal with modernity. The way out of such modern dilemmas seems to be sheer suicide or madness.

Many of us modern citizens live therefore in a culture that makes sharing simultaneously easier and more difficult. Easier on the one hand, because free individuals in democratic regimes enjoy freedom of expression and association, of making personal choices. More difficult on the other hand, because individual urgency of earning a living – a condition that we often paradoxically share without the sense of sharing - inhibits the socializing moments that belong to the communication texture that makes sharing consistent, as a praxis of joyful interchange.

If we assume the freedom of excavating the asphalt in order to find the beach which means utopia, according to the sixty-eighty slogans, we may even reach a handful of sand, which we are at the first moment unable to share. It is not only a matter of searching a kind of cultural second nature, in form of a lost tribal tradition. We have also seen the historical results of the obsession to find or build forms of group sheltering, out of modern loneliness. They have led to forms of totalitarianism, where the freedom of exchanging free opinions with the others on the public realm has been simply erased.



Let us assume that Kant's anthropological assertion of the «*unsocial sociability*» has a considerable amount of experienced historical reality. This would open the door to other anthropological interpretations of human beings as being born with an openness resulting from the lack of autonomy. Let us stick to this image, associated with Hannah Arendt's assertion of acting among the others (and not towards a mystified abstraction of «*the Other*») as a symbolic form of birth, of nativity. By communicating and sharing our knowledge (Dalai Lama said) we achieve the only possible form of reliable immortality. This kind of sharing means earth connection, not bank donation.

We need both tradition and modernity, also in order to deal with the so-called crisis. This word may also have been felt as a mere *cliché* of real ancient tragedies, when whole populations were massacred in wars or lost their entire living basis in nature catastrophes. Media discourses of (financial) crisis have a taste or ruminant arrogance towards the sufferance of contemporary whole populations in other continents. We still have a roof over our heads, flowing warm water in our homes, enough to eat and dress.

But do we have the courage to live with the essential goods, not sacrificing animals in order to get nourished, assuming the transitorily aspects of creation and interaction as if they were moments of being – as Virginia Wolf has put it – and handling with the objects that we call ours and that will survive us as if they were ephemeral goods, that we can easily give away because the most important aspect of sharing comes of an immaterial impulse of becoming part of the eyes and ears of the world?

Until this moment, the word peace has been avoided, perhaps because such a word easily becomes another *cliché* if it is merely proclaimed, not converted into a living praxis, out of a desire to end all superfluous forms of daily violence, to break the chains of repression and cruelty and looking into the eyes of another individual, even if we do not speak his or her language.

May be then we have found a lost paradigm, which lies around the corner and can be reached by our stretched hand, without asking why.