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but what does "wonder" do?

meanings, canons, too?

on literary texts, cultural contexts, and what it's like to be one/not one of us

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Consciousness may be implemented by neurobiological processes-how else?-but the language of neurobiology does not and cannot convey what it's like to be conscious. If, as philosopher Thomas Nagel says, there is something it's like to be a bat, there is something even more interesting it's like to be one of us. . . .

Jonathan Miller, "Trouble in Mind," 1992

It will be seen that. . . [this] is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 1967

Towards the conclusion of his paper Herbert Simon points out that while he has been "exploring the contexts from which meanings arise" he has not been "*expressing* the *wonder* that meanings can evoke" (emphasis mine). Since the original intent of his paper had been to attempt to bridge the divide between Snow's "two cultures" by proposing ways in which the disciplinary practice of literary criticism could be made into a "branch of cognitive science," by his relegating of the "wonder that meanings can evoke" to a practise of *expressing*, and by his thereby implicit refusal to *explore* (as he does with the "contexts from which meanings can arise") the phenomenon of *wonder*, which is, of course, the phenomenon of the aesthetic, Simon reenacts the very division his essay has set out to bridge.

The historian J.G.A. Pocock, has reconceptualized this division as one between two *languages*. The first is that of the natural sciences whose object of inquiry is, as Simon defines it in his essay, "the laws and

boundary conditions of physical and biological nature." The second however, (in whose domain any "expression" of, or any inquiry into, the *wonder* that the meanings of literary texts can and do evoke, has necessarily to be carried out) functions as quite another form of knowledge (Pocock, 1971: 6). Pocock describes this order of knowledge in the terms of what AI theorists would identify as a frame-based model of reasoning (Barr and Feigenbaum, 1981: 216-222]; and therefore of what the European thinker Ricoeur has analyzed as the reasoning of *ideology*, but the term ideology used in a non-pejorative sense to refer to the kind of reasoning whose function is not, primarily, to provide veridical truth, but rather the "general horizon of understanding," or in AI terms, the *subjective understanding* (Jaime Carbonell quoted by (Waldrop, 1987: 82)), by means of which alone each human order can be dynamically integrated, transcending the divisions of its social hierarchies, and stably replicated (Ricoeur, 1979: 114-117).

The disciplinary discourses of the humanities and social sciences (including that of literary criticism) therefore must be seen, as Pocock further argued, as being elaborated by scholars on the basis of the "paradigm of value and authority" that is founding to each order. If we identify Pocock's "paradigm of value and authority" as being synonymous with the governing code of the Word, the logos, which, as Ernesto Grassi argues, took the place, for human subjects, of the fixed biological codes, we can put forward the hypothesis that Grassi's new, culture-specific verbal codes would, once instituted, come to serve as the frame from which the "directive signs" orienting and motivating the ensemble of collective behaviours now are issued. In the context of the above, it seems to me that the premise which condemns Simon's proposed cognitive approach to literary criticism to repeating the division it had set out to dissolve, is the premise of *supraculturalism*. This premise, which takes our present "native model" of reality to be isomorphic with an ostensibly objective reality, out there, (Legesse, 1973: 274) is one specific to the now globalized "local culture" in which we find ourselves; and is therefore, a founding a priori of our present "public language" order of knowledge. This is so because if, as the ethnologist Marcel Griaule points out, "throughout the centuries" and whatever the "changes in the mode of production," the Judeo-Christian symbolic system has continued to provide the "ultimate reference point" for all Western social systems (Griaule quoted by Mudimbe, 1988: 142), the premise of universality that had been founding to Judeo-Christianity's "Grand Narrative of Emancipation" as a world religion in its matrix medieval form, has been carried over, (as a "property inheritance" of the same "semantic network" in the terms of AI, or through, in the terms of literary criticism, the rhetorical strategies of "transumption" or "metalepsis") (Bloom, 1975: 73-75) to our now purely secularized version of that original "grand Narrative." As a result, this a priori of *aculturalism*, because fundamental to our present "paradigm of value and authority" which, *inter alia*, represents both the "individual" and the "language community" as Simon does in his paper (note 2, 26) as *pre-existing* the cultural-semantic field by which alone we can become "individuals" and inter-altruistic "communities" of symbolic kin (Campbell, 1988: 21-24), is as founding to our present "public language" order of knowledge, as the a priori of *atemporalism* had been founding to the Scholastic order of knowledge of feudal-Christian Europe.

In the above context the question of the division of the two cultures, the two languages that Simon addresses in his paper, as well as of that of the premise of *aculturalism* which gives rise to this division and also finally defeats his project, can be seen to be of urgent moment. For the possibility of our species

extinction of which environmentalists warn is, I shall propose here, like all the other global crises that we confront, a direct effect of the sharp imbalance that now exists between the two *cultures* or *languages*; that is, between the increasing autonomy of cognition that we have come to gain with respect to our species-knowledge of the physical and biological levels of reality, an autonomy that has led to our vastly expanded capacities to alter these processes in accordance with our human purposes, and our lack of any such autonomy with respect to the processes of functioning of the governing codes of the cultural systems.

The paradox of Simon's paper is that it both opens the possibility of bringing an end to this sharp imbalance, by making possible our cognitive autonomy with respect to the processes that institute our consciousness, induce our purposes, and thereby motivate our behaviours, and closes off this possibility. With respect to the first thrust, his paper provides us with penetrating and lucid insights into the functioning of what he defines as the "mind's eye" and the "mind's heart"; and, therefore, of Pocock's "paradigm of value and authority," of Ricoeur's ideology and its "general horizon of understanding" that is essential to the integration of each order. Most illuminatingly of all, these insights reveal to us the "how" of the functioning of the processes which Ralph Ellison's narrator in the 1950s novel *The Invisible Man* described as the construction of the "inner eyes with which you look with your physical eyes upon reality," (Ellison, 1972: 3), and in whose logic, the Black narrator *had* to be invisibilized. Indeed, on pages 13 and 14, Simon's paper shows us *how* specific mis-interpretations both of texts, as well as of social reality, can appear veridical to the mis-interpreter. Note for example his point that representations, meanings, and remembered events are perceived by the same neuronal processes by which actual events are perceived. And again,

a mental picture formed by retrieving some information from memory or by visualizing the meaning of a spoken or written paragraph is stored in the same brain tissue and acted on by the same mental processes as the picture recorded by the eyes [and, by a process that is] no less mysterious than one that can similarly translate the impact of photons on the retina. (13)

Yet it is with this last formulation that the second thrust of Simon's paper serves to close off the possibility of our *exploring* of, rather than merely *expressing*, the "wonder" that the meanings of literary texts (which are always *cultural* texts) evoke. Besides Freud's phylogeny and ontogeny, as Fanon wrote, on the basis of the empirical data gained from his Black psychiatric patients, all of whom had come to be averse to their own color and physiognomy, there is sociogeny (Fanon, 1964: 10-14). As Fanon's data reveal, the processes which constitute the event of "mental pictures formed by information" cannot be explored by the same means by which the physical event of photons-on-a-retina are explored. In that, the "mental picture" as constituted by the information, specific to our present "local culture," and which is also internalized by Fanon's Black patients, by Ellison's fictional narrator, as well as by all others, by its representation of this color and physiognomy as the stigmatized marker of human Otherness to our present conception of the human (Pandian, 1985: 2-3). This was and is so, given the fact that in our present culture-systemic *mind's eye* and *mind's heart*, Black Americans are as prescriptively made into the conceptual Other (Bauman, 1989: 38-39), to our present conception of the North American us as being generically a Euro-American us, as half a century ago, a German of Jewish descent, would have awoken to find him/herself, the marker of Conceptual Otherness to a new "us" that was no longer

"German" but "Aryan"; the marker then of Otherness to a new canon, a new mode of being (Fein, 1979: 6-10, 26-30). For canons are never the mere formulae that Simon proposes them to be (20). Nor can the present battle over the canons which is a battle about the hierarchies of race and class, a battle over the definition of the "us" be resolved by the purely operational theory of meaning that Simon puts forward in his paper.

For canons do. Literary texts and meanings too. (As David Bohm points out "meanings directly affect matter"; a word like "assailant," for example, when one walks alone at night and sees a shadow, triggers the physiological response of flight or fight, while the recognition that it is only the branch of a tree reverses the process) (Bohm, 1982: 74). Yet meanings are always culture-relative as are the specific *forms* of our mind's eye. And while Simon's paper shows us the processes of *how* the functions of the neuronal processes by which "meanings" come to be perceived are implemented, his oversight of the always culture-systemic and narratively instituted field in which meanings *mean*, and therefore of *what* specifically the meanings of canons, as well as of literary texts, and the wonder that they evoke, *do*, leads him to reenact the central assumptions of the premise of *aculturalism* on whose basis the division between our two cultures, our two languages, and the sharp imbalance in the degrees of cognitive autonomy between them, is structured.

One of these assumptions is that such contexts can ever be, in the case of humans, non-dependent on the meta-context of the cultural systems whose archetypal governing codes of symbolic life and death and criterion of being (and therefore of what its like to be one/not one of us) serve to institute the processes of sociogenesis through which we can alone come to experience ourselves as *human*. Since human being, (like *mind*, Simon's *mind's eye*, inner eyes, or Miller's *consciousness*), although implemented by the physiological processes of the body and the neurobiological processes of the brain, is not itself a "property of matter" (Miller, 1992: 180). Rather, it is a property of meaning, and of, *inter alia*, the "wonder" that the meanings of literary texts, as those of all art, all religion, of the numinous, evoke. In consequence, the exploration of the "wonder" that the meanings of literary texts evoke, in effect of what literary texts do, can only be effected by and through the exploration of the culture-specific "vernacular languages of belief and desire" (Miller, 1992: 180), in whose terms alone literary texts are enabled to evoke the specific intended responses of their order's original subjects (Wynter, 1992: 243-244). In consequence, Simon's decision to explore the contexts from which these meaning arise as if they were and are as culture-free as both traditional and radical critics make them out to be, precludes the practise that is alone able to effect the bridging of both fields. This practise would be that of a correlated exploration of wonder, as well as of the culture-specific context in which it is induced by literary and other texts, within the terms of a newly projected culture-scientific order of truth.

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