FROM BODY TO WORD..., FROM WORD TO EROS**An analyst's reading the Llosa's "Storyteller"***Bogdan Sebastian Cuc⁹*

Abstract: *When describing the two instincts in his work "The Ego and the Id", Freud says that the "Eros, by bringing about a more and more far-reaching combination of the particles into which living substance is dispersed, aims at complicating life and at the same time, of course, at preserving it". This complication, which I consider to be rather an increased complexity, can be found in the patients' discourse through the diversification of means of expression and attributed significations, when their "stories" open up to us and to new meanings... However, when stories are meant to free the body of the burden of a stigmata, which must be covered with histories and significants, how can we identify the flux of the Eros in the counter-sense of a Thanatos that, as Freud said, "tends to return the organic to the lifeless state"? I therefore propose that we try and explore this effort to tell the story of the body expression forms through words, in Mario Vargas Llosa's novel, The Storyteller...*

Key words: Eros, Thanatos, life history, body language, psychical working-over, translation

Introduction

When describing the two instincts in his work "The Ego and the Id", Freud says that the "Eros, by bringing about a more and more far-reaching combination of the particles into which living substance is dispersed, aims at complicating life and at the same time, of course, at

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preserving it”. (Freud, 1923, p. 32) This complication, which I consider to be rather an increased complexity, can be found in the patients’ discourse through the diversification of means of expression and attributed significations, when their “stories” open up to us and to new meanings... This phenomenon, or process, can be extremely interesting when we take into account the way in which explorations of the body, starting from the first experiences inscribed in the alternation between Eros and Thanatos, become gradually significant before turning into words and speech. Ownership of the body is thus established, it becomes a psychic reality; it historicizes, gaining its own stories that cover it, give it shape, from corporal significant to formal significant, to words and histories of intimacy.

The analysis of the process of displacement, or transformation into Bion’s paradigm, of the meaning from body to word, presents an epistemological difficulty. As any endeavor to explore certain processes of modification supposes access to an evaluation grid, so of signification of the process of transition from one state to another, allowing to report differences between the initial and the final moments, the exploration of the body’s transformations into word also requires a set of markers to permit the identification of stages, states and evolutions. Yet this would mean we only took into account the way in which corporal expressions are modified in order to become verbal expressions, words, therefore limiting ourselves to the psychoanalytical exploration of a process of translation, from one language to another. But the specific of psychoanalytical exploration focusing on how the body and corporal expressions become words, become parts of the psychic, originates in the very central point from which we begin – the instinct, *der Trieb*. It is interesting how the Romanian translation of the German noun *der Trieb* offers, aside from the meaning of instinct (also known as drive in psychoanalysis), two other meanings that can be helpful in this endeavor: offspring and scion. It is, I believe, even as it starts from a linguistic speculation, interesting to consider the corporal reality, rudimentary bodily expressions, the archaic, as offspring or scions of explorations and psychic developments that allow for evolution, growth, or even... healing...

Another important trait typical of psychoanalytic-type explorations is that psychoanalysis is not reduced to a translation, as stated in reductionist perspectives over psychoanalytical theories, over psychoanalysis in general, of the kind that connect a symptom from the present to an event in the past, through a link specific to reductionist determinism. The issue does no rest in the significance of the connection, but in accompanied writing, or even re-writing of stories, of histories – in historicisation. In other words, between being present and being involved in processes of transformation, from one moment to another, from one form of

manifestation or expression to another. What fuels this endeavor is precisely the force of the Eros, which supports life and allows the construction of stories that save one from mortification, in danger of becoming a continuous present that cannot be transformed or displaced. The eroticization of interactions with the body, transformative erotic explorations, those that permit the movement of psychic energy in a free manner, from one representation to another, is precisely the way to psychically integrate corporal experience, the body. This eroticization supposes the creation of fantasies, of scenarios of satisfaction, which can become the stories that create the body, the psychic, the phantasmatic life and the oneiric experiences.

However, when stories are meant to free the body of the burden of a stigmata, which must be covered with histories and significants, how can we identify the flux of the Eros in the counter-sense of a Thanatos that, as Freud said, “tends to return the organic to the lifeless state”? How important is the presence of another being, as carrier of the life drive meaning, as a presence to accompany along the way, as a witness of existence?

The stories ...

I therefore propose that we try and explore this effort to eroticize as a way to keep alive a body overwhelmed by complex cultural experiences, but that must integrate forms apparently impossible to integrate in the universe of those particular cultural experiences. It is a search for other ways to embody forms of corporal expression in words, but using words that are rediscovered in a universe different from the one in which the protagonist of Mario Vargas Llosa's novel, *The Storyteller*, grew up in... It is also a journey into a universe where our guide takes us not only to show us the path of his friend, but also to witness his own attempt to eroticize an experience that marked him during youth.

Mario Vargas Llosa, a Peruvian writer, is a Nobel Prize laureate for Literature in 2010. Llosa's life story is interesting from the perspective of his relation with boundaries and with identifying layers and nuances that differentiate the interactions and relationships between things, between people. Born in Peru, he spent the first part of his childhood in Bolivia with his maternal grandparents and mother. In this period he was living with the idea that his father had passed and that he had been a great hero. In reality, his father had left his mother when she became pregnant. After he turned 10, he returned to Peru with his father. At the age of 21 he married an aunt, who he divorces 9 years later. One year after the divorce, he marries a cousin.

He has a very rich and varied professional life, collaborating with universities across Europe and America.

The Storyteller is a novel written in a balance between operational accounts, with carefully rendered details, in an almost journalistic or even anthropological manner, and oneiric descriptions, with mysterious characters and fantastical stories, which seem to belong in worlds Llosa manages to take us to in a seductive way. The storyline of Llosa's novel takes the reader from descriptions flowing seductively to impasse experiences, when the known, accessible markers dissolve in fantastic tales with bizarre characters performing strange, cruel and even terrifying rituals.

In short, in this novel Llosa brings us the story of a character presented as real, a friend from the author's days as a student, Saul Zuratas, Jewish, who had a large birthmark on his face, making him easily noticed by anyone passing by and earning him the nickname of Mascarita. Llosa speculates on the subject of this mark, tying it to how the character, his friend, was a Jew. The issue of the corporal sign that allows one to identify the belonging to the Jewish people is brought up as a quirk by Llosa, a quirk for Mascarita, the son on a Jew and a Christian Creole who died two years after they moved to Lima, where she was rejected by the Jewish community. The story of his belonging to the Jewish religion and culture is presented by Llosa through the words of his character (I could say his patient) as more of a strangeness of Mascarita's father: "His problem, he said, was that his father had made too much money with his general store back home; so much that one fine day he'd decided to move to Lima. And since they'd come to the capital his father had taken up Judaism. (...) Ridiculous! Chicken pox in old age, that's what it was! Or rather, the religion of Abraham and Moses." (Mario Vargas Llosa, 1989, p. 18)

This experience of finding an identity again, of identification markers, from a Jewish immigrant who left for Peru after the war, one who, according to the Polish or Russian accent (as Llosa described his manner of speaking Spanish) came from Eastern Europe, is extremely interesting for the economy of a novel in which the main character, the son of this Jew, is looking for, or rather is reinventing his identification markers by rewriting his own history, starting from a mark on his body.

His father was forced to hide the body signs that identified him as Jewish in order to keep his life and the memory of a belonging that he let emerge only when he felt safe. In

Mascarita's case, the son of the Jewish refugee who fled from a space of horror, had to rewrite his history and belongings in order to save a sign of his body, one which he did not wish to hide, instead wanting to integrate it, giving it meaning, significance, but different from the one that the words of those around him covered him in... For this reason, starting from the realities constructed by these words, Saul Zuratas, transformed in Mascarita, has to seek another form, therefore other words...

Keenly interested in the life of a nomadic tribe, the Machiguenga, who lived their lives in the Amazonian jungle, Mascarita begins to approach this tribe, alongside which he manages to rewrite his own life history. What is interesting about this tribe is the existence of a character built in the forms of ritualistic experiences that seem to come from a fantastic world. The character, who becomes the central focus of Llosa's novel, giving it its' title (*El Hablador* – The Storyteller) had the role of keeping the memory of a community in permanent movement, while maintaining communication between the different families that made up this tribe and which lived separated from one another.

Because of their nomadic nature, the tribesmen were also called "those who walk", and the stories that united those who walked represented the existential axis for the Machiguenga. Practically, the tribe was formed of smaller groups that would travel through the Amazonian jungle, looking for resources and avoiding dangers, for which oneiric experiences mediated by the use of hallucinogenic substances (trances) was one of the forms that helped them connect with nature: plants, animals, celestial bodies. Their Universe is full of animism, of celestial bodies that turn into plants, animals or people, or the other way around, with those who become beings with powers that allow them to transform the universe in a way that leads it to preservation, rescue and continuity.

The main belief was that if they stopped walking, the world would fall apart, a belief that was increasingly difficult to support in concrete reality, taking into account how the Amazonian jungle had already been breached by Christian missionaries who tried to transform the nomadic tribes in settlements typical of the civilized world. The novel features all the possible perspectives of interaction with the Amazonian tribes, from the position that supported the necessity of civilization and the subordination of the "*savages*", to stances moderated by the search for a form of compromise, to the perspective of the idealization of primitive forms of existence and the affirmation of the necessity for them to be preserved in their original form. Mascarita, Llosa's main character in the novel, passionately supported the idea that there should

be no intervention in the lives of the Amazonian jungle populations. It also seems that this issue was the only one capable of making Mascarita forgo his calm and quiet, which seemed odd to the author, present as a secondary character in the novel, a narrator.

Llosa's approach is extremely interesting, especially since he seems to start from a friendship relationship, perhaps even love, with a university colleague, for which he embarks on a transformation experience, from the body's inscriptions to the spoken word, to the word that tells a story, to the written word, that gives the account of the forms of erotic exploration and the author's personal Thanatic angst. I fantasized, reading Llosa's novel, that it presented to his readers a character, similar to the way a patient is brought into a supervision presentation, not only with the desire to be helped to understand, but also with the desire, or rather precisely because of the desire to have others witness an attempt at accompanying someone in a process of transformation, of displacement. Even more so as he makes us believe that the character is not a figment of his imagination, but a man alongside whom he walked and who he told stories to for a long period of time.

The novel starts from a moment where, being in Florence to study Dante and Machiavelli (interesting choice, isn't it?!?), he discovers in an exhibition of photographs and objects from his homeland of Peru, a photo that disturbs him... The declaration at the opening of the novel is also of interest: "I came to Firenze to forget Peru and the Peruvians for a while, and suddenly my unfortunate country forced itself upon me this morning in the most unexpected way" (Mario Vargas Llosa, 1989, p. 9).

The unexpected way Llosa writes about it refers to how he accidentally discovers in a showcase some clothing items and photographs from Peru. Curious, he enters and discovers a photo that he has the impression features his friend among tribesmen, a friend he had lost contact with and who he had thought was in Israel. Initially, uncertain it was actually his friend, he embarks on the exploration of a possible truth, and in the end, he declares his certainty concerning his friend's presence in the photo. We do not know whether the photograph becomes clearer to him, or if the effort to tell us his friend's story, the story of Mascarita, seductively packaged in the fantastic tale of a tribe with fascinating histories and beliefs allows him access to a truth which grows clearer not through simplification, but by including as many bizarre, contradictory or contentious realities. This search for the truth about his friend is an attempt to move away from the refusal of reality (*Verleugnung*), heading towards a form of reality reconstruction following the coordinates of magical rituals, a displacement that is supported by

the life instinct (*Lebensntriebe*), because what appears to represent the purpose and resource of this venture is the love for his friend.

In one of the novel's first accounts, where Llosa presents us his friend's passion for the people of the Machiguenga tribe, the sign of Mascarita's first searches appears, or rather of what he had found and tried to translate in the language of those among which he was still living.

"The designs on their utensils and their cushmas, the tattoos on their faces and bodies, were neither fanciful nor decorative, pal. They were a coded writing that contained the secret names of people and magic formulas to protect things from damage and their owners from evil spells laid on them through such objects" (Mario Vargas Llosa, 1989, p. 29).

This manner of introducing the meaning of the designs on the body, designs which are later said to be dictated by a bearded, noisy deity, god of thunder, passed on to the shaman during a trance brought on by hallucinogenic plants, represents the repositioning of the body in relation to the word. The sacredness of the body's form is given by the word that preceded and outlined it. Akin to his father's faith, the word comes from the bearded deity who thunders it to the one meant to fulfill it. The sanctification of the search for the meaning behind the birthmark starts from the re-making of divinity and of forms of manifestation and expression of its sacred discourse. I say re-making, because it is as if Llosa's character were re-writing the Genesis. The truth of this re-writing becomes an aesthetic truth the purpose of which is no longer to reveal the origin, but to maintain a balance between the forces of the universe where Llosa's character, as well as the author himself, reside.

The re-making, the rewriting, although starting from the identification markers (objects) recovered from the father's history, unravels around the experience of non-integration of the mother, the Talara Creole who had come to Lima only to be rejected by the Jewish community, who branded her a *goya*. However, in Mascarita's memory, the mother appeared in a different light:

"My old lady and I were as close as fingernail and flesh. She, too, was as bored as an oyster in the synagogue, and without Don Salomón's catching on, we used to play Yan-Ken-Po on the sly to make those religious Sabbaths go by more quickly. At a distance: she would sit in the front row of the gallery, and I'd be downstairs, with the men. We'd

move our hands at the same time and sometimes we'd fall into fits of laughter that horrified the holier-than-thous" (Mario Vargas Llosa, 1989, p. 22).

What appears in the relationship between Mascarita and his mother, seemingly absent in the relationship with the father, is the presence of eroticization as a means to integrate mortiferous experiences, of annulment and rejection. They were protecting themselves from an implacable destiny which seemed cast in a magical formula through words that appeared to say that if the community wouldn't accept them, they couldn't live. From this perspective, the destiny of his mother, who dies two years after their move to Lima, seems to be a tragic demonstration of this magical formula, like an original trauma. If the father comes from a place of horror to a destination where he manages to save himself, eroticizing work and the effort to re-build himself in a community which accepts him, Mascarita's mother goes on an opposite trip. The way he, Saul Zuratas-Mascarita, succeeds in integrating the two destinies can be found in the description he provides for himself: "half Jewish and half monster" (Mario Vargas Llosa, 1989, p. 53).

For Llosa, disguised as the storyteller-narrator who accompanies us as a guide throughout Mascarita's experiences, the solution the latter finds gains magical, even mystical, valences. This occurs precisely because of the manner in which he integrates the "*monster*" in the history he is re-writing. The re-writing Llosa brings is the rewriting of a marked body, a body inscribed with designs containing an unknown message, for which the father's hermeneutics aren't clarifying, for which the finding, invention or perhaps the re-construction of another deciphering system is necessary. Personally, I lean more towards the Winnicottian option, where the author and the character co-construct a hermeneutic which allows the sign to be deciphered and integrated in the history that makes life possible.

At the beginning of the story, when he discovers the photo in Florence in which he identifies his friend, he also finds out the story of the photographer who took it. Its author, a photographer named Gabriele Malfatti, before going to Peru and taking these photos, had worked as a fashion photographer, capturing designs, jewelry and furniture. Yet his dream was to achieve something special, something remarkable. The tragedy of this character is that, in Peru, in the Amazonian jungle, where he fulfills his dream, he dies, killed by a virus he had been exposed to while there. Llosa finds out the photographer's story when he finds his friend, an event presented as a displacement, occurring by chance... or perhaps not. Once again placing myself in the universe of linguistic speculation, I cannot abstain from remarking that the Italian

translation of the photographer's name, Malfatti (mal fatti), means badly made. Llosa makes no comment on this, but it is also he who selected this particular name, he chose how the rebirth of his friend's story starts from learning Malfatti's tragic destiny.

The magical, even mystical, manner in which Llosa builds his character is born out of a sacrifice, found in the way he presents the evolution of his friend:

“With hindsight, knowing what happened to him later—I have thought about this a lot—I can say that Saúl experienced a conversion. In a cultural sense and perhaps in a religious one also. It is the only concrete case I have had occasion to observe from close at hand that has seemed to give meaning to, to make real, what the priests at the school where I studied tried to convey to us during catechism through phrases such as “receiving grace”, “being touched by grace”, “falling into the snares of grace”. From his first contact with the Amazon jungle, Mascarita was caught in a spiritual trap that made a different person of him” (Mario Vargas Llosa, 1989, pp. 36-37).

Apparently this description is the unmasking of a process, analyzed and portrayed in the *après-coup*, but in my interpretation it seems more of a love declaration for his friend, for how he succeeds in accompanying him not only in the philosophically and politically tinged extended discussions and debates, but through his thinking, through the transition from one state to another of his emotions, his thoughts, which are overwhelming even for the narrating author, but for which the latter finds the resources to transform with and for his friend. Mascarita's change is transformed, elaborated, processed and evoked by the author in a way that resembles the ritual of patients' stories' transformations, which can only be thusly evoked and “*confessed*” by third parties.

Conclusion

Llosa's confession brings up a magical process, of mystic transformations, hallucinatory experiences, characters that undergo strange metamorphoses, yet all taking into account the experience of accompanying in an effort to re-write and re-inscription. All this experience may come across as a reverie of the author's in the character's presence, a reverie that, through the eroticization achieved by free associations, aesthetic tuning, brings forth the hegemony of the sensitive, of the emotional over the rational, allowing regression and the re-making of the

character, for each and every reader. Thus, words become merely the carriers of a sensorial flux, a flux of the sensitive.

The story of the Storyteller, told in writing by Llosa the storyteller, is a chain of undifferentiated transitions from one universe to another, from one world to another, from one... to another... The space created so, which is also time, represents a construction with and in which we can define and differentiate nuances and forms while also enjoying them, as if we were rediscovering the world. The space time-unity Llosa creates belongs, in equal measure, to separations and fusions, lights and shadows, beings and non-beings, encounters and non-encounters.

But it is also the magical space of a permanent march towards a horizon that mustn't be reached, only targeted, because only thus can the world be maintained alive and whole. This space is a space of perpetual movement, and permanent movement means life. Llosa confesses this life in words, through the word... But words, as Llosa evokes, as if detached from Bion's reveries, do not appear in our life as carriers of meaning, of signification, at least not as we utilize them as adults, who have already been through the stages of integration. They appear like sounds, having only audio characteristics to which we attribute meanings depending on how these audio characteristics make us feel, react, in this space of the sensitive, of primary sensibility.

Mario Vargas Llosa, a writer, therefore a wordsmith, brings us a bizarre experience through words, a search for a time and space when and where the body gained meaning, gained life, psychic life through the words carried by Eros, by the life instinct. Yet this process, this journey, only seems possible through what I would call the "de-wordification of the body".

Llosa's solution, from the novel's conclusion, is to give us the word learned and repeated by a parrot that accompanied the Storyteller, repeating: Mas-ca-ri-ta, Mas-ca-ri-ta, Mas-ca-ri-ta...

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