Encounters with the Other: the Feud of Identities

Monica SPIRIDON

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1. The Myth of the Wild Man revisited

It is common knowledge that standard European identity has always been flaked by the image of the Other both as a barbaric figure opposed to the Western man and as an obstacle to a free cross-cultural communication. One of the basic principles of Western culture and a major landmark of European identity has been the equation civilized versus wild. In the process by which Western identity was constituted, the opposition civilized versus barbarian as well as the Figure of *the Barbarian* played an important role. Consequently, the myth of the barbarian is tightly bound up with the exposition of the basic mythical components of Western identity (Bartra 1994: 146).

Traveling has the advantage of creating images of the Other, of analyzing otherness and of making it easier to accept and also of finding surprising ways of coping with it (Moura 1998). In the real and imaginary travel journals that I am pointing to in the following pages, the intertwining of modern travel writings with major questions concerning Western culture is very highlighting: *Voyages de l'autre côté; Le livre des fuites; Le Chercheur d'Or, Voyage à Rodrigues* (Le Clézio); *India, The Library of the Maharajah* (Mircea Eliade) and *Traveling with Quixote* (Thomas Mann). Despite different starting points they end up by questioning the status of the equation civilized versus barbarian, trying to redefine the two notions and to invalidate the stereotypes floating around them.

Turning the tables on those who suggest that the primitive peoples, discovered and colonized by European explorers gave birth to the myth, we have to accept the hypothesis that, in fact, the already existing myth of the wild man helped shape European reactions to real people. In this way, the wild man underpins the notion of civilization on which much of Western identity has been based (Bartra 1994: 147, 148).

The very idea of a contrast between a wild natural state and a civilized cultural configuration is part of an ensemble of myths sustaining the identity of the civilized West and emphasizing the *otherness*, the *difference*. Yet, one need to merely cast an eye on the myth of the wild man to realize that we are dealing with an imaginary form existing only on a mythological level (Duer 1986).

Eliade usually sets the epithet "barbarian" between inverted commas when he is referring to India or to Indians. It is his way of showing that he is using it as a quotation from the typical European discourse (the discourse of the white man who

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brought "civilization" to India). By using it the author of the journal is challenging the idea, turning its meaning upside down. And I quote:

> In double ventilated train cars, Americans are praising the blessings and the reforms of continental civilization in a barbarian country (Eliade 1935: 54).

And further on: "Benares is stretching in all its weary barbarian beauty" (Eliade 1935: 64). At a certain point the author maintains that

> barbarian is rather the outlook of modern Europeans on the botanical garden: a concept that can only have its roots in a stupid epoch like the XIXth century (Eliade 1935: 104).

The terms of the current equation are interchanged. The only barbarian is the civilization-bringing Englishman who needs to build up a monotonous town like Darjeeling, in order to feel at home:

> Englishmen who are forced to spend a longer time in *wilderness* would make any effort to change their habitat into a small corner of England. It is they who refer to local people as *these poor savages* (Eliade, 1935: 106).

Civilization, its motives and its models unify but also flatten differences and nuances.

> It is not Europe – splendid and immortal reality – that I dislike, he concludes. It is the stupid tendency of the European of molding all the rest of the world after himself (Eliade 1935: 84).

Again in Thomas Mann's journal the relationship between civilized and barbaric is explicitly phrased and emphatically reiterated. The epithet "civilized" is frequently used. Mann is, for instance, talking about "being disgusted of the mechanism of civilization" hidden in his own personality. He also mentions the desire to give up civilization for the primitivism, for the uncertainty, for the irrational and the adventure:

> Does this pleasure betray my own disgust with the mechanism of civilization, a desire to abandon it, to deny it, to reject it, as being destructive for my soul and for my life, a desire to search for a new life style, closer to the primitive and to improvisation. Is there in me a voice that is crying for the irrational, for this cult of the danger, of risks and of abuses, this cult against which I have been guarded by my critical rational consciousness, a cult which I have fought against – out of my sympathy for the European, for rationality and for order, or maybe because of an in-built need for balance – as if I didn't have in myself enough to battle against? (Mann 1934: 293).

The escape of the self-exiled writer from Europe – herself at a crossroads in the middle of a century of crisis – provides him with an opportunity to take a stimulating distance that facilitates a reexamination of a highly debatable equation. Civilization and the barbaric – generally speaking – are for Mann the torn halves of a turmoiled cultural hybrid. Mann is able to discover a barbarian side to the very culture of modern Europe – the barbarity of nazism, for instance, Nietzsche's criticism of canonical European values.

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Nietzsche himself – who is seen by Mann in close connection with the idea of the barbarian side to modern European identity – includes in his *Birth of Tragedy*, a dialogue between the Fridjean king Midas and the barbarian Silenus, about the recipe of happiness. Although Silenus himself is meant to be the very embodiment of the non-European he can also be seen as a symbol of the hidden, repressed dimension of Europenism.

Following Le Clézio's line of argument, barbarian should be equivalent to natural or even to savage. Oma, Naja Naja or the author himself are proud to be perceived as savages ("Moi aussi je suis un peu sauvage" – "I myself am a little bit of a savage", Le Clézio admits during a highly confessive interview). To be more specific, in *Le Chercheur d' Or*, the savages are always the Others, the non-civilized Alterity, to put it in the European system of reference. If compared for instance to a character like Robinson, the "savages" do not even try to imitate the so called civilized way of life. On the contrary, they prefer to imitate the other living creatures of the Earth. Their bodies actually belong to the Universe. Therefore they feel themselves outside the humanity and protected against it (Onimus1994: 130)

Germaine Brée is following all throughout the works of Le Clézio the development of the author's identity. He starts off as a humanist, trying to bring meaning and reality to the concept of *Human being*. The next step is dissolution of this *Human being* into a plurality of similar human beings. In a final stage the author becomes aware of what we call cultural differentiation. Eventually the torn halves of his run-away identity come to terms with each other. He is gradually becoming a one between many others (Brée 1990: 48).

2. The *Wild* and the *Marginal*

Undertaking the toppling of hierarchies and axiologies, the three authors identify themselves as somewhat marginals, as reported to the core paradigm of European identity. From its standpoint, Mann, Eliade, Le Clézio may be rated as eccentrics, magicians, mad etc. The disorder of eccentricity they engender ensues from their being schismatic cultural personalities.

At this point we have to be aware of the clear-cut distinction between marginal and wild. The marginal is not necessarily a genuine savage. He rather ended up becoming a savage. And by doing this, he had stepped out of the so called normality. Consequently he is a byproduct of civilization and even a run-away from normality. In Le Clézio system of values, he does not have any of the defining attributes of the savage. We should could rather say that he rejects all the common standards of civilization. A savage is supported and legitimated by a specific culture, while a marginal is a lost and a displaced human being (Onimus 1994: 130–133)

Some of the protagonists and of the fictitious narrators of Le Clézio's travel writings explicitly assume the values of marginality, which the author himself does, every time when he decides to openly undertake the task of the narrative-author: a first person auctorial stance. Adam Polo, the main character of Le Clézio's very first book, is the perfect illustration of this status of the outsider. The great majority of the others are tramps, fugitives, ill-adjusted, outlaws, savages leaving their lives in the middle of a city. Sick and tired of civilization they are the personification of the chaos of order.

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The most relevant example is young man Hogan, in *Le Livre des fuites. Young man* is the only clue that we are provided with, the only means of identifying the character: a human being reduced to essence, to the common traits of the species, and due to that an outsider in the world of civilized Europeans. The voice of the narrator is following him everywhere and relating his journey across the world. The character starts off as the inhabitant of an anonymous Mediterranean town and ends up as the perpetual wanderer in the remote corners of the world.

The typical European obsession with the Barbarian is the disguise of a profound need of self definement. It has suffocated the presence of other virtual voices of europenism: the interior voices of self-contained alterity, preventing them from surfacing freely.

Having a strong consciousness of his German identity, Mann seems to embody the very heart of Europenism. In fact, aside from that, the center and the periphery of Western identity co-exist inside him. Mann is defining his run-away identity: aware that it incorporates wilderness. Therefore we may conclude that Mann's personal experience epitomizes the very status of European and Western identity.

Unlike Mann, Eliade and Le Clézio are more strinkingly the carriers of a peripheral European identity. Eliade has been throughout this entire lifetime, faced with the problem of self-definition as an European from the point of view of the Romanian originary "Huron". *How can one be a Romanian?* is the key-question that has structured both his existence and his work. In Eliade's case, the criticism of Europenism comes from a distanced and peripheral person: the speaker of several reputedly exotic languages, the historian of religions, the author of some books about shamanism and of a Ph.D. dissertation about yoga.

Following the footsteps of his friend Young and of the Eranos circle, Eliade is in search for the hidden roots of universal cultures and civilizations. The Indian civilization is a perfect example of the non-barbaric. Eliade is almost overturning: for him the Indian civilization is more of an antidote to barbarity rather than the other way around.

Le Clézio is a displaced European. His roots are to be found in the far away corners of the universe, to which he is tied by strong biographical connections. He does not even need, in the pursuit of his quest, to go beyond the familiar space and the familiar, quotidian time. He only has to recover inside him the love for The Other, and the sympathy for the Alterity.

3. The hidden face of the Other

The hermeneutic dimension of traveling is pregnantly illustrated and defined by Mircea Eliade. For him, the deciphering of meanings is the only key we have to understanding the Other. Alterity always expresses itself on the level of meanings rather than on the level of facts:

> The sensitivity of the civilized is opaque to the symbolistic and to the inner rhythm projected in the environment (Eliade 1935: 106).

Facts, events, objects, objects, versus meanings is the key opposition for solving the tensions myself/ the other. Facts are affecting us not through what they are but through their meaning. For this reason traveling is for Eliade a semiotic adventure of deciphering alterity:

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> A primeval forest, never-ending, incomprehensible – this is the eucalyptus forest that the traveler is crossing on the way to Amritsar (Eliade 1935: 72).

In Eliade's traveling journal meanings grasped from experience are transposed visually, translated in iconic symbols: cinematographical, photographical metaphors called visions or simply icons. At a certain point, the writer is talking about the European and the non-European eye. In that matter an essential statement of the author is that tourist adverts rarely feature the most significant characteristics of India, because, and I quote:

> The essential can never be captured by statistics and its usually avoided by photographers. Roughly speaking the hermeneutic vocation of his travel journals is striking. How many Indias are there in fact? – he is rhetorically wondering. As many as we can find for the same so-called cultural topography (Eliade 1935: 46).

In the traveling journals of the three authors there are also enlightening occasions when writing mirrors writing.

It is common knowledge that certain forms of writing have self-reflecting revealing features, all the more is in the case of a re-read and re-written journal. Eliade, for instance has afterwards re-read his travel journal and has commented upon it, rewriting it as a different journal and a series of travel articles, first printed in Romanian magazines and then collected in one volume (under the title *The Library of the Maharajah*).

Le Clézio is adding to his travel book *Le Chercheur d'Or* a conjoint journal throwing light upon the genesis of the book: *Voyage à Rodrigues.*

The reading of Thomas Mann underlines the sections of the text in which Cervantes imaginarily stages the reflection upon binaries like European/ non-European, civilized/ barbarian. Mann is insisting upon the device of ascribing the manuscript about Quixote to a fictional non-European author, the More: Cid Hamet Ben Engeli. Cervantes is pretending to filter the staging and the reading Quixote s adventures from the viewpoint of a Stranger. The translation of text from Arabic to Spanish is thus becoming the metaphorical equivalent of the dialogue and of the relationship between the autocratic identity and non-European alterity. As far as the adventures of Quixote are being screened from opposite standpoints, the fictitious characterare assigned a complex arch-cultural (and meta-european) identity.

A enlightening episode in Mann's travel diary accounts for the fate of the More Ricote, the ex-grocer from Sancho Panza's village.

Exiled from Spain for being a foreigner, he has to return to his native country named Berberia (Barbaria?). Perceived as a barbarian form the European standpoint, the exiled grocer suffers form a very symptomatic nostalgia. He very badly misses Spain, perceives it as his home and as the cradle of his genuine identity. Once more, cultural identity is cross-checked by both Cervantes and Man. Eventually the opposition myself/ the other, the same/ different is questioned and invalidated.

Among the puzzling identities on display in the traveling book re-read by the German author, the character of Cardenio – *the wild man from Sierra Morena* deserves a special attention. To put it shortly, on his way Quixote comes across a disappointed lover who has decided to exile himself in the wilderness of Sierra Morena and mourns his vanished love copying the savage lifestyle. Cervantes fakes seeing see Cardenio both as an outsider and as a savage. As a matter of fact, these

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are the two main attributes of barbarity in respect to which European identity has been defined during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. At a certain point in the novel Quixote himself decides to mimic Cardenio. By this means, Cervantes provided himself with a fine opportunity to undertake an ironical critique of so-called barbarity.

Cardenio is by no means "a genuine savage". He only plays the part assigned to the wild man in the European cultural space. In order to cope with barbarity the German writer needed a mitigating image: Quixote – a *Figura* of his own deep, hidden, alterity. As far as Quixote decides to imitate the wild man from Sierra Morrena, the whole series of mirrorings eventually enhance the hermeneutic potential of Mann's reading.

For Le Clézio, optical effects, mirrorings, the visual, the iconic play an essential part in the interpretation of identity-linked meanings. According to Germaine Brée, *Le livre des fuites* illustrates an examples of Le Clézio's cinematographical technique:

> His narrative devices resemble the old silent movies, doubled by a an invisible reader, scriptwriter and interpreter.The key of all his work should be considered the essay *La Magie du cinéma,* where the movie is being seen as an sketch of a totally different world. The sound proof of the reality of this rather puzzling world are our feelings towards the events preset on the screen (Brée 1990: 68).

4. Networks of the encounter

A special emphasis is being laid by all the three writers on the stereotypes of the encounter Self/ The Other. Fostered by modern European culture the repertoire of stereotypes had functioned mainly through linguistic networks and following specific mythical patterns.

On the whole, Eliade, Le Clézio and Mann have operated convergently. They have generally worked on the same lines, unveiling the mythical substance of the Barbarian seen as an Alterity in relation to the European identity. This mythic wildness has profoundly shaped rational and scientific discourses such as Western-formed historiography and ethnography and also fantastic and travel literature, has engendered the stereotype of the good savage in the fiction of the Enlightenment etc.

The Stranger discovered by Eliade in India is radically different from this stereotypical image originated in the European imaginary and circulating mostly through cultural networks:

> Maybe Amritsar is going to be one more disappointment, like so many other places and cities of India, places and cities that I have heard to much about, that I have imagined to much about (Eliade 1935: 73).

The writer is constantly aware of the multiple cultural filters that are screening his personal contacts with the Difference, even with the difference in Nature: the Indian night for instance. He is quite aware that any direct contact with it is impossible and... incomprehensible:

> […] it is not the night of Italy or of Romania. To draw nearer to it you must first get rid of Novalis nights, the nights of the French romantics, or of the Latin poets. And even then, the oriental legend charm of the *1001 Arabian Nights* still separates you from it. Arabia stretches between you and the Indian night (Eliade 1935: 75).

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The modern history of the wild man – discovered by colonizers, exalted by the Enlightenment, studied by ethnologists – should be understood as an unfolding of an ancient myth (Bartra 1994: 204). The barbarian was a fixed and tangible phenomenon offering Europeans an extraordinary opportunity to gaze into the mirror of otherness.

Progressively the symbolic image of the barbarian has been transformed into a rational and scientific concept, capable of capturing the otherness of the allegedly non-civilized societies: a mental universe ruled by mythos and opposed to logos.

Eliade concludes that the mythology of barbarity and the myth of the barbarian, in their various forms, have acted as a network of codes, repeatedly interpreting the Western culture. According to him, the sacred could be successfully approached through the stereotypes and the models of cultural mythology. The myth contains various codes with which to interpret Western culture. Due to its metaphoric richness and to its multiple significances, the myth of the wild man becomes a medium by which the origins of the idea of Western civilization / identity-alterity/ may be interpreted.

During his Indian travels, Eliade currently uses certain mediators to facilitate communication and understanding between himself and the Other: "A crocodile resembles, a dragon from my Nibelungian childhood" (Eliade 1935: 34). Later the author notices that the choices, the likes and dislikes of the travelers are inspired by books rather than reality: more precisely by geographical books and by sentimental novels.

In *Voyages de l'autre côté* and *Le livre des fuites*, Le Clézio always involves a series of myths, of legends and of fictions, from the oldest narrative scenarios regarding the birth of the human species to the modern scenarios of extra-terrestrial journeys. *Le livre des fuites* is quite remarkable because of the unusual density of mythical and literary imaginary schemes that are being used, from the Odyssey to the SF writings, meant to push the narrative forward and to the quest and the voyage towards the unknown (Germaine Brée 1990: 69).

This particular kind of travel eventually emerges as a Quest. A search for a way towards an essential and rewarding cultural realm built on particular foundations, other than reason and abstract speculation. Icarus, Jason, Ariadna, Quixote are among the mythical figures systematically listed by Le Clézio's commentators.

Consequently, is not a conflict between two different kinds of worlds. That Le Clézio's fictional writings and essays are emphasizing, but rather the incompatibility of two equally valid interpretations of the same reality.

Travel literature is a journey that has the great privilege to grant textual substance and reality to the efforts of transgressing, of going beyond the monolithical space of identity and of its canonical representations.

What is almost crucial in this respect is the double function adopted by travel literature: the function of discourse (*textual*) and the function of conceptualization (*meta-textual*). In this respect, travel literature resembles fantastic literature that has flourished especially where the centrypet rhetoric of the monolythical Western europenism has collapsed.

In the case of Thomas Mann, the meta-textual conceptualizing role is the most poignant while the discursive representation is mediated: entrusted to Cervantes and to his wandering fictitious character.

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The discursive function is, however, prevailing on Le Clézio's case. Midway between the two, Mircea Eliade's works illustrate a more balanced recipe.

Traveling is generally the representation of a world of order or of disorder: an excursion into the chaos or the counter-order of extraculture. As far as space and time are being reinterpreted, the result of this re-organization is the birth of chronotop typical for travel. Le Clézio, for instance, declares bluntly: "It is in time, not in space that I am traveling" (Le Clézio 1986: 35). Traveling with Quixote and through him with chivalry novels allows Mann to descend to successive temporal levels. Spatial distances between the familiar, the European, the civilized, on the one hand, and the unfamiliar, the barbaric etc. on the other, become the perfect equivalents of a journey in time. The outcome of this is a transfer in time – in the European historical past of a reality usually perceived as mainly spatial: cultural difference.

In Eliade's case, the ontological passages in space and the travel in eternity, in time belong to the same chronotope. He annulates the categories of time and space engendering a peculiar travel chronotope. In Eliade's travel narrative, the discursive level is more substantial than in Thomas Mann's case, where emphatically displayed conceptualization is the dominating element.

The covert semantic affinity between the other, (as the repressed or forgotten) and the other as the foreign or strange becomes overt in the transformation of the forgotten into a mysterious marvelous or monstrous object. The barbaric side of the European past, suffocated by the conventions of normality and rationality, the Alterity banished by each of us in the hidden sides of our identity, surfaces and takes a tangible shape. In this way a representable space is born, alongside with an exotical, geographical, ethnical, non-European foreign Alterity. The image of the Other is a cover (a masque) for all that is repressed, forgotten or made absent, that which was or could have been a part of our cultural experience.

If we switch to a metatextual level, Eliade is working towards annihilating the opposition between the central and the peripheric and between the past and the present. His travel diary subverts the validity of fundamental categories like appropriateness, extravagance, adventure, hallucination, sorcery, para-science.

Marguerite Yourcenar astutely detects Mann's efforts to redefine all throughout his works, two allegedly contrasting categories, the humanist and the mythological, building a bridge between them, underlining the links between them. A quotation from the writer s travel journal confirms and completes her hypothesis: "It is *the multilateral not the unique* that designs the future" (Mann 1934: 280).

In their travel writings the three authors undertake a convergent critic of the travel writing itself as a literary genre. Mann does it by resorting to the reading of Cervantes, adding a pair of *hermeneutical glasses* to be able to accurately narrate and to understand his experience.

Le Clézio is implicitly questions the picaresque recipe as his travel writings are recreating the mythical itinerary of famous wanderers as well undertaking a criticism of the stereotypes of rambling.

The turning point of Le Clézio's travel writings is an implicit plea in favor of intellectual ecumenism. This would be the one to open the doors of Western spirituality to different cultural worlds, emerging from fabulous times and spaces. In this respect the perfect illustration is *Le Chercheur d'or*, the story of the both real

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and mythical return of the writer towards the sources of his identity. Le Clézio is quite aware that he does not need to go on a quest, beyond the familiar space and the familiar, quotidian time, but only to recover inside him his love for the Other, and his sympathy for Alterity.

There are sections of Eliade's text openly criticizing the genre itself, because it traditionally records facts rather than interpretations. Author of a hermeneutic journal, Eliade is undertaking a criticism of the very idea of tourism as an itinerary in a land of events and of objects rather than of meanings:

> Travel journals can sometimes make admirable books. But those few facts, maybe even those tens of facts that every traveler comes into direct contact with doesn't really mean much. They rarely have any positive significance. They are never, at least almost never, decisive. How does hundred or one thousand facts enhance the understanding of a extremely diverse country such as India? (Eliade 1935: 15).

Or, in a different context:

> I don't really believe in travel literature. You can write in so many ways about the Orient. It really comes down to how much you a ready to uncover and to the quantity of facts that you are determined conceal (Eliade 1935: 18).

5. Pathways towards pluralism

The writings of texts written by Eliade, Le Clézio and Mann contend with the textual tradition of the binary model civilized versus barbarian. They suggest a re-definition of the now polemical category at the heart of multicultural debate, namely Western Civilization. At least Mann and Le Clézio also suggest the urgency as well as the necessity for coming to terms with the wildness within the heart of Europenism.

All travel writings have a subversive dimension because they pursue the aim of creating alternative worlds as well as they attempt to compensate for a frustration resulting from cultural constraints. The relationship homo versus hetero-cultural is never shaped as a clear-cut polar model. In either of the three author s texts it is acted out rather as a permanent transgression of the boundaries between present, absent, true, false. It is this very image of ambivalence that makes the travel writing a conceptual force, disturbingly interfering with the models produced by a culture in order to come to terms with its "other".

Displaying the projection that has resulted in the image of the Foreigner in Western European Culture is the greatest achievement from these travel writings. Therefore we might conclude that the polarity European versus Non-European, civilized versus wild should not be seen as an ontologically but as an hermeneuticaly oriented one.

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Abstract

Our paper points up to the interweaving of modern travel writing with major questions pointing to Western culture. In real or imaginary texts of J.-M.G. Le Clézio, Mircea Eliade and Thomas Mann European identity is at stake. Regardless of their different starting points, the authors end up questioning the status of the equation civilised versus wild, as a basic principle of Western culture. A special emphasis is placed by the three writers on the stereotypes of the encounter Myself/ The Other, fostered by modern European culture mainly through mythical patterns.

University of Bucharest
Romania

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