Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 2 (51) - 2009
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN THE SELF IN ALDOUS HUXLEY'S *THE MONOCLE* AND A.E. BACONSKY'S *THE STONECUTTER'S RUN*

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the struggle that appears within the self of the artist who discovers himself in a society that imposes limits and strict rules to the artistic environment. The individual finds himself at the border of existence as he does not know which is the path to follow and as he is often unable to make a clear decision. Aldous Huxley's The Monicle and A.E. Baconsky's The Stonecutter's Run will be the stories in which the analysis of this inner struggle unfolds underlining the points in which the two artists meent and those in which their life approaches diverge.*

Key words: *self, limitation, artist, solitude.*

The artistic environment may be seen as a sphere of confusion, wonder and research, an area in which people are lead on a path of self-discovery or self-awareness. Such a path is the starting point for the artists themselves while those who witness the process can add something to the understanding of this world. Aldous Huxley and A.E. Baconsky are two authors whose writings emphasize the role of the artists in the society and their influence upon those who come into direct contact with them. This paper discusses the individuals' (artists or intellectuals) way of coping with the world and with the society being interested in outlining their qualms and concerns as they appear shaped in the two authors' short stories. We chose Aldous Huxley's *The Monocle* and A. E. Baconsky's *The Stonecutter's Run* in order to analyze the connections between two different / similar ways of approaching the individual's existence. The artist is perceived as someone who seeks to find, more than others, explanations to his existence or, most commonly, wonders about his place among the other human beings. He seems to get detached from the ordinary background, his existence developing at a different level, a more conscious one. This level makes the artist become acutely aware of his responsibility towards the others and towards himself.

In these short stories the reader encounters the dilemma of the artist who discovers himself placed at the border of existence trying to find the path to follow. In Aldous Huxley's short story the reader is confronted with several ways of perceiving art and the artists, most of these confrontations wearing the veil of the author's ironic remarks. The use of irony may be a path to revealing the fact that individuals choose to wear a mask instead of showing themselves as they actually are. Using a mask implies an assurance that the

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other people will accept, praise or admire this individual who displays the image of an almost perfect person. Huxley's individuals are in search of a better social position or they are simply looking for better material comfort. What's the purpose of Huxley's presentation of the artists of his day? The answer to this question is many-folded. One possibility may be that he was a part of this artistic world which he described from within and which he knew both in practice and in theory. He looked with a critical eye at the atmosphere of his time and he penned some stories about the way he understood that environment. Another answer could be that he was interested in art more than in its material advantages. Something like art for art's sake, even though he did not go that far.

He shaped the realities of his time in these stories which abound in allusions and ironies to the individual who wants to appear something that he is not, the interest in the selfish affairs being placed above the pure art. The authentic artist is very hard to find in such an atmosphere or better said is very hard to identify. This artist has to confront the society's judgments and interests and still keep his mind clear for his purposes. It is a difficult task and it requires special devotion and sacrifice, but Huxley showed that the genuine artists could find the strength to struggle with their inner desires and with the society's demands. Huxley presented in his stories "[…] some samples of reality most of which are built on the contrast between appearance and essence or, rather, the contrast between a limited understanding and a hard-to-grasp reality" (Ciocoi-Pop 92). This contrast between appearance and essence is the one that leads the artist to the idea that only solitude and silence can bring him closer to his purpose.

Being situated in a space of passage (Câmpan 108) (not in one place, nor in the other) the artist is always on the point of choosing one way or another. Even this placement between appearance and essence is a permanent problem of choice due to which within the self of the individual a struggle is being led. In A. E. Baconsky's story, for example, we find the artist confronting the society's limitations and his placement on the border of two spaces: a spiritual one and a material one. Baconsky's story and Huxley's too, develop on the idea of the interrelationship between the self and the world. The artist discovers himself in close connection with the social background from which he cannot escape. He exiles himself, as a form of defence against the society or the people, somewhere in his interior taking upon himself the status of the stranger. (*Ibidem*) Baconsky's stories show an artist in search of an understanding of life and of his own being. The artist passes through a process of conscience meant to bring to surface his inner thoughts and conflicts in order to lead him to the fulfillment of his expectations.

One central idea of the two stories is that of the search for a meaning which expedition takes place mainly in their interior, where they can reflect upon their existence and their surroundings (events, people, things). In *The Monocle* the reader meets an individual who finds himself caught between two worlds. Gregory has a certain group of friends, but he finds it difficult to establish a fixed place for himself among that group. He is wearing a monocle and this seems to be the reason why he cannot act properly among the others. His placement at the edge of two worlds is the result of the education he received. Gregory is conscious of his social status, of his provincialism and when the doctor gave him the eye diagnostic he saw it as a pretext for turning into someone more elegant who could impress more. But as time passes he realizes that using the monocle does not

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bring him more confidence or appreciation. On the contrary, most of the time he feels strange using it. He is convinced that there are certain circles in which the monocle would be totally inappropriate like in a group of poor people (they will feel offended) or a group of very rich people (he would feel like a parvenu in the field of monocles among them).

Analyzing a little this image of the monocle one could observe the following directions. On the one side the monocle represents the half of a whole. It does not offer a complete image of an object, but only enables the person wearing it to have a complete perspective of an item or even another person. It may suggest incompleteness just the way this character feels. He has the feeling of belonging to two worlds and he cannot fit into either of them. On the other hand the monocle gives Gregory the chance to interpret a role, to act as if he were a different self. This need to be perceived by the others from another angle, not the way he really is, points out this character's understanding of existence, or better said, his illusion of existence. The monocle is a way of evading his reality, of living in another sphere, of feeling important and appreciated. The problem is that he is not aware that the monocle raises a wall between himself and the others and also drives him away from his peers. He wants to be perceived as an intellectual, as a person whose life evolves above the material things and according to the cultural issues whereas his origins and his way of life become an obstacle in achieving social success.

Gregory is exposed at one of the parties he attends, which represents an appropriate medium for his intentions, those of making himself interesting and admired. Here he meets Paxton, a drunkard, who understands Gregory's role play and because of that he makes fun of him. Paxton does not miss one opportunity to laugh at Gregory and to compel him to accept that he is playing a role and that his mask can easily be taken off. The irony Huxley uses through this Paxton is a way of showing his disapproval of those who pretended to be someone else denying themselves the path of sincerity. An issue that should be mentioned is that the writer chooses a character with very little credibility to point out Gregory's faults. This could be because people have the tendency to ignore those with a lower social status or those in difficulties just because they are not strong enough to sustain some points of view. Huxley draws the reader's attention that each individual has this chance of being listened and then analyzed no matter what his physical or spiritual characteristics are. Even though the individuals in the story ignore Paxton, Gregory knows he speaks the truth for which reason he avoids him as much as he can. Actually he is constantly running from the one who is not afraid to tell him the truth about his real self and to say it face to face.

As Gregory establishes some connections with the people at the party he becomes more aware that graduating from university had not given him the chance to distance himself from the provincial school boy he was. Despite his literary inclinations, education and refinement he is conscious that he is the rich heir of a shoemaker. The use of the monocle appears as a way of entering other social classes, but he fails in this attempt because he lacks confidence and natural talent as he himself recognizes at a point. Paxton's suggestion to keep a state of drunkenness (in order to say anything you want) makes Gregory feel superior and entitled to treat him from considerate distance.

Wanting to escape from Paxton, Gregory goes to his group of friends: Ransom and Mary Haig and Ms Camperdown. In this circle of friends he starts telling some stories (the same he used to tell every time

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they met). While telling them he sees himself in a mirror and suddenly his mind is inveded by questions: why should one go to the parties? Why? The same boring people, the same gossip and the old salon puns. Every time it's the same. He seems to have a shock when facing reality. Till this moment Gregory was playing his role and was very happy with it. But when he sees himself in the mirror he seems to have a revelation. It's like the veil of confusion has fallen. Suddenly he sees himself as he really is- an actor interpreting a futile role. Still he plays the role finishing the stories. But then he feels ashamed of himself especially when the others laugh at his stories. This shift of perception of this moment (from thrilled to ashamed) shows that something must have happened inside him. When exactly it happened we do not know but the story underlines the effects of that change even though they are short-lived.

In Gregory's inner self a struggle is being carried on between the desire to keep his mask and the wish to express himself as he actually is. He has moments when he is obliged by the circumstances to see how he really is and these are the times when he immediately tries to escape. His conscience confronts him with reality, but he keeps ignoring the signs. He would like to be considered a person who appreciates life and art, but at the same time he refuses to be sincere with any of them. He would like to be in two places at once: in the circle of the men of letters and in his own circle. He avoids authenticity and people perceive him as a false individual and their reaction is a consequence to this perception.

The active conscience may be a sign of a placement in the realm of actuality and of becoming aware that the human being has a road to follow. Gregory is in search of *something* that might give sense to his life even though he does not know from the beginning what that *something* is. He has only flashes of consciousness which later on come to annoy him and he will try to put them aside. In order to escape this boring state or his own thoughts he starts listening to others' conversations trying to enter other spheres. Finally he gets to the point when only a drink can save him from the repeated stories and from his own inquiry. We see that Gregory's search for meaning is too powerful for him to undertake it completely. It's much easier for him to find small alternatives to the dialogue with his own conscience. Drinking and playing a role are ways of keeping himself busy and away from his thoughts.

The way this character is build up shows that each individual has a debt to himself before to the others. If the individual limits himself to playing a role and avoids a deeper analysis of his feelings and desires he is destined to loneliness or irony (from his peers). People cannot be fooled that easily and what they expect from one is sincerity. Insisting to pretend that things are as he says they are, Gregory receives only ironic smiles and often total rejections. In spite of the evidence he goes on playing his role pretending not to understand the reactions of the others or judging them as inferior to him. His conscience is the one that brings to surface the things he tries to keep hidden. He is constantly reminded through the attitudes and gestures of the other characters that he is not what he says he is, but he fights them, forcing himself to keep that image he created. He has moments when he is aware that he has to recognize some things (like when Molly tells the others that he has that sum of money and he cannot deny it so strongly as when she was not there). Gregory finds himself between two spheres that of truth and that of pretence. He cannot pass either on one side or the other because he is not sure of what he truly wants. Pretending to be in a certain

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way helps him at times (when he does not want to give a part of his money) but also makes him feel more acutely his loneliness (when he wants to tell Spiller his true feelings for Molly and he cannot). The state of doubt characterizes him and impedes him from finding that *something* that would give meaning to his life.

Gregory comes to be an individual who is unable to cope with the society, an outsider, if he can be called like that. He maintains a specific distance between his inner self and the other people as he is unable to express what he really feels. Acting in the same manner for a longer period of time he is incapable of getting out from that circle. He has to move in the same direction on two levels. At one level he confronts the other people in a pre-established way, at another level he constantly sustains a dialogue with his concience. Not even in the end of the story does he succeed in bringing to a common point the two level. His struggle remains inside. Those around him being unable to notice anything. He chose to be lonely inside, not to let anyone enter his *world* for fear that he would no longer be liked or admired. However he fails in making others like him precisely because of this avoidance of acting naturally. The choice for inner solitude and struggle is this character's way of dealing with the artistic world and with its challenges.

If Huxley's story unfolds around a character struggling within himself, unable to express his inner feelings and thoughts, Baconsky's story, *The Stonecutter's Run* (*Fuga pietrarului*), bears another type of artist and of reality seen through the artist's eyes. The narration starts from the idea that the artist is a lonely individual who needs to find some understanding from the others in order to be able to continue his life. Baconsky's story includes a short motto which encompasses the theme of the story and also makes a reference to the artist's destiny and struggle: "Siento el dolor mas no veo la mano, / Ni puedo huir, ni me es dado escudarme." (Fray Luis de Leon, *A Nuestra Señora*) (Baconsky 47) The artist feels the pain of his existence but he cannot see where it comes from and he cannot run away from it nor get some protection against it. He is denied the possibility of defending himself against this pain because he has to overcome it.

The story presents the destiny of a stonecutter who is confronted with the awareness of his fate and with the meanings of his life. In the town he lives there are few people and his only purpose in that place is to wait for winter and to scabble stone crosses (which were more and more) for the big and aggressive cemetery situated in the middle of the town: "Oamenii erau puțini şi risipiți ca după o invazie sau o epidemie necunoscută. Şi eu eram unul dintre ei. Singurul meu rost în acea aşezare îndepărtată era să aştept iarna şi să cioplesc troițe pentru mormintele care se înmulțeau mereu în cimitirul mare şi agresiv, aflat în mijlocul oraşului" (*Ibidem* 49).

From the beginning we realize that this stone sculptor is limited to scabbling crosses and this limitation impedes him from revealing himself as a real artist. He is aware that he finds himself in a strange situation and he tries to understand what is his purpose there. He wanted for a long time to leave this town because he could not express himself in that atmosphere, but there were always some things that made him postpone his leaving: "Marea, zăpezile, vântul şi clopotele mă înlănțuiau din nou şi mă purtau printr-o lume în care visam că se petrece, departe undeva, adevărata mea existență" (*Ibidem* 50). He feels that his real existence is somewhere else but he cannot find the strength to leave town. What he finds here is just the same monotony and for a while he tries to

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tolerate it, but he comes to realize that he cannot adapt to that way of life. He always ended up distancing himself from the others and only later on did he understand that his reactions were opposite to theirs and that is why they saw him differently. For example he was full of hope when the others were full of worry or he was full of sadness when the others were full of confidence: "Câtăva vreme am încercat şi eu să-i urmez, dar întotdeauna sfârşeam prin a-i îndepărta de mine fără să-mi dau seama. Abia după aceea înţelegeam că-mi manifestasem speranţa când ei erau cuprinşi de îngrijorare sau că mă copleşise tristeţea în timp ce toţi ceilalţi îşi surâdeau încrezători unul altuia" (*Ibidem* 50). His reactions reveal him as different from the others. His artistic side manifests itself in every aspect of life and he cannot avoid it.

If there was a period when he tried to adapt to the town's monotony and to its people things changed because his conscience became active. He becomes aware of the setting and also of the small things that bring fulfillment to his life. Making crosses is not his only purpose in life. He pays more attention to his surroundings because he realizes the existence of minor issues that may change one's perspective of life. A struggle appears when he wishes to see beyond the surface of things and beyond people's reactions or words. This path has begun long before, but he did not have the chance to analyze the steps he took. At night he tries to read a book from a forgotten century, but he discovers himself evading the book's pages and placing himself in the world of his thoughts: "Încercam să citesc o carte dintr-un secol uitat, dar mă surprindeam din timp în timp cu gândul evadat din paginile ei" (*Ibidem* 52).

He tries to live inside and to strengthen his mind. He looks for refuge in his childhood, but he fails as he is invaded by the vicinity. He receives several messages and different things are thrown into his yard without catching the ones who did that. He has to accept the exterior as it is too powerful to ignore. People seem to have put him aside and he gets to be lonelier and lonelier without any possibility of escaping: "Ajunsesem din ce în ce mai singur, mai ferecat în solitudinea mea desperată, căreia numai iarna, marea şi vântul îi aduceau aceeaşi alinare zadarnică" (*Ibidem* 53). That is why when he finishes scabbling the stone he goes towards the sea. The elements of nature bring him some comfort as the seagulls cast away his thoughts, the wind answers the questions coming from his awkward voice. His thoughts take him to a fantastic world where the beings become the masks for foggy ideals.

He starts being haunted by the thought of leaving town especially due to the increased number of crosses from his yard (which people paid but left there) and to the way people relate to a beggar (who was a certain person first and is another now although people act as if he were the same). One night he decides to leave town starting on a road of desperation and terror. For a long time he has the feeling of being followed: "Putea fi gândul meu, care nu mai era cu mine, sau o parte din propria-mi viaţă, rămasă în oraşul acela. Când anii se scutură de umbrele lor, se face un gol în suflet şi ţi se pare mereu că te urmează cineva" (*Ibidem* 55). He feels a void in his soul as a part of his life remained in that town. That void from the soul makes him think that someone follows him. He still feels he did not get far enough from that crossroad where his run started. Very late he decides to make a halt as he is very tired. He gets to a foggy town one night and he has no strength to go on so he enters a house without paying too much attention to it. He cannot sleep: "Ochii nu izbuteau să mi se închidă, gândurile nu le puteam alunga" (*Ibidem* 56). He sees

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people at his window that look inside. He wakes up. He hears some steps (the same steps of the beggar that he used to hear long before he left his town). The people from outside start showing their stone arms and heads. The character-narrator seems to have returned to the town he ran from.

Baconsky's story mingles reality and illusion. The stonecutter is a character whose inner struggle leads him to a journey in the world of imagination. Everything is in such close connection to reality that the reader gets lost in the web of thoughts if he does not pay attention to details. The destiny of the stonecutter presupposes that the artist's fate may be interpreted at various levels. Facing an individual searching for some answers the reader faces some of his own questions related to existence, meaning, feelings, freedom etc.

The town he lives in imposes too many limits to his imagination and creativity and he needs to leave these behind in order to find that *something* which might change his perspective on life. As Aldous Huxley underlined in his story, the artist has the capacity of presenting the world as a unity by gathering the most important aspects of human existence. Baconsky's stonecutter tries to build up that unity of existence, but he cannot because the society, the people impede him to be creative or to go beyond the present issues. When he tries to adapt to their conditions he sees that there is no possibility of combining his life perception and the rules of the town and of its people. The only way to free himself from any constrains is to leave town. He finally manages to do that but he is held back by the memories and by that part of his life that remains in that town.

Finally it turns out that the stonecutter got back from where he left in the first place. Maybe he never left, just in his imagination. It is ironical to realize that after all the efforts to escape monotony and limitation the artist returns home. Baconsky allowed the reader to give his own interpretation of the ending. One explanation would be that the limits imposed by the society cannot be defeated just by running away from them. The artist, especially, has to confront the society and its people and to struggle with their rules if he wants to achieve freedom of thought. By running the stonecutter recognised that he lacked the strength to oppose his people and their rules. Another possible explanation may be that no matter how much does the artist try to forget his past and his roots he cannot. It is almost impossible to escape the past. The memories and the people he knew will always be in his mind. His return home is the result of his incapacity of breaking with the past (he feels he is followed, he cannot sleep). This idea of not being able to forget the roots is encountered in Huxley's story too. Gregory cannot forget that he is the rich heir of a shoemaker and from this point his reactions are connected to this small detail, but which has a big impact upon his conscience. The stonecutter and Gregory run from their roots but they keep them present in their minds. Each one finds a way to ignore or to escape them for a while, but they always return because the change of perspective is not done at the level of their conscience. Both characters want to forget that past, but this desire is expressed at a superficial level. None of them goes deeper in their conscience to see if that liberation from the past is actually possible. Their alternatives are to keep their mind busy with trivial things or to travel from a place to another. If they might have stopped and analyzed their conscience the result might have been different. Both authors underline here that the human being in general has little time to make analyses. There are always more important things to deal with and so the conscience process is left aside.

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Another possible explanation for the stonecutter's return to his town may be that his return is compulsory in order for him to understand something about his life and to become aware that running is not the equivalent of solving a problem. T.S. Eliot said that "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." So if we interpret this return home from Eliot's point of view we may say that the stonecutter started an exploration of his life and returning home meant the end of his journey. He is given the chance to see that place with other eyes and to try to face its people and their way of thinking.

The struggle within the self of Huxley's and Baconsky's characters appears under the form of a process of conscience. Each character begins analyzing his life from a present situation. They are all in close connection to the society they live in and to the people they relate to. They are influenced by their background and cannot escape the limits imposed by their peers or by the society. Each of the two writers sees the artist in close relation to the social background and to the people he interacts with. The characters' search for meaning metamorphoses into a struggle with their inner limits. They have to fight their own thoughts and beliefs and to see beyond the ephemeral things. What counts in their search for meaning is that they activate their consciousness and they begin seeing life from other angles. Having several dialogues with their interior voice the characters become aware of their role as artists or intellectuals or at least they discover that their sensibility asks for a special manner of approaching life and the surroundings.

Both characters, the stonecutter and Gregory, step on this struggle within the self as a result of the answer they try to offer to the people and the society they live in. Their artistic nature leads them on this path revealing themselves as they actually are and bringing to the surface their inner conflicts and interests. Their incapacity of telling others what they feel and think may be the effect of the society's influence, or the effect of the artistic environment in which they live. Each one perceives art in a different way, but what brings them closer is their need for solitude, for analysis, for maintaining a constant dialogue with their conscience. The struggle within their selves represents their way of coping with the reality and their way of approaching existence.

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