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Interpretando la experiencia de la tolerancia Interpreting the Experience of Tolerance

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Tolerancia: Interpretando la experiencia de la tolerancia
Toleration: Interpreting the Experience of Tolerance

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**Testimony, Postmodernism, and Perversion:
Interpreting Otherness. (A Response by Richard Kearney to
Eileen Rizo-Patrón, Brian Treanor, and John Manoussakis)**

**Testimonio, post-modernismo y perversión: interpretando la otredad.
(Una respuesta de Richard Kearney a Eileen Rizo-Patrón,
Brian Treanor y John Manoussakis)**

§ 1.

In her paper, «Stranger in our Midst: Reflections on/of the Testimonial *Theoros*», Eileen Rizo-Patrón engages in a daring hermeneutic retrieval. She proposes to take the conventional notion of *theoria* as abstract reasoning or pure theoretical knowledge back to its pre-Platonic roots in the ancient figure of the *theoros* —an ambassador who used to be sent by the Greek state to observe and report on the Dionysian festivals. Translating this figure onto the postmodern stage —with the purpose of reflecting on the spectator's seeing— she then sketches out three ways in which witnesses and reporters of today's crises are often found responding to the question of «liminal others» (particularly to marginalized peoples as found in recent Latin American documentaries or testimonial narratives). These three ways might be summarized as follows:

- (1) The *theoros* as a social scientist or ethnographer who observes and records the lives of individuals and communities in particular socio-cultural settings. This practice involves maintaining a degree of personal detachment while interviewing subjects, in the attempt to produce an objective account of their life-worlds. Works by ethnographers like Oscar Lewis or social theorists like Alan Harwood, mentioned by the author, would fall into this category.
- (2) The *theoros* as a foreign journalist who reports on the social maladies, violence, and abject poverty that plague third-world countries. As an example, Rizo-Patrón cites Joan Didion's *Salvador*, a testimonial account of her two-week sojourn in El Salvador during its civil war. Although the journalist travels from battlefields to body dumps to uncover what the political regime does not want covered, as a witness she is overtaken by a sense of chaos and horror that repels any attempt to interpret the significance of events or to communicate with the protagonists of that reality.
- (3) The *theoros* as a writer who feels personally addressed by the claims of marginalized individuals —people in desperate situations of poverty and illiteracy, whose voices are hardly heeded. The testimonial writer, in this case, responds ethically by entering into a dialogical relation with the dispossessed subjects, helping them tell their stories. Rizo-Patrón cites the compelling case of Elena Poniatowska's extended interviews with Jesusa Palancares about her life —an exchange which records the rocky friendship that develops

between these two women from opposite ends of Mexican society, and their collaboration in constructing the testimonial novel on Jesusa's life.

Elaborating on the third kind of *theoros*, the author claims that Elena Poniatowska, whose privileged upbringing made her a total stranger to Jesusa's world, eventually comes to share in Jesusa's «oneiric reality». This occurs in moments when Jesusa's narrative draws Elena into the space of her visions and dreams —despite the fact that Elena doesn't exactly share Jesusa's spiritualist beliefs (reincarnation, the ability to communicate with deceased family members through spiritual possession and mediumships, etc).

If my reading is correct, I have four comments to make regarding Rizo-Patrón's intriguing account.

First, a question: what exactly is the dimension of narrative surplus or excess that allows these two women from opposite poles of the social spectrum to be drawn together? What, in short, is the «oneiric space» where they could meet beyond the cultural matrix within which they each lived out their separate lives? Does it pre-exist their exchange, or is it a product of it?

Second, it was not entirely clear to me whether the myths of reincarnation and extrasensory communication represented some kind of ontological reality for Jesusa. And if so, did Elena —as *theoros*— share in Jesusa's «reality», with its curious eschatological perspective? Or did she remain a skeptical if sympathetic interlocutor? My guess is that some kind of narrative surplus is provided by the imaginary space opened up by the exchange, allowing the two interlocutors and by extension, us the readers, to join a conversation in spite of our different cultural, social, spiritual or intellectual backgrounds. Such a space would have the power to inaugurate a process of semantic innovation where we are, even momentarily, allowed to transcend our respective horizons of pre-understanding and presupposition so as to explore new possibilities of meaning. And this free play of possibilities, fostered by the imaginary surplus, in turn permits us to review different notions of “reality” with tolerance and freedom. I think it is to such a poetics —and ethics— of hospitality that Rizo-Patrón's paper points. In the exchange of perspectives that follows from this, we see how inherited notions of ontological «reality» and «fact» are revised and reconfigured through a process of «free variation» and mutual empathy. And this in turn allows for what I might call a miracle of reciprocal emancipation: Jesusa is liberated from her grinding empirical hardship and oppressive social identity; while Elena is liberated from her own particular sense of «postmodern melancholy» as a privileged, highly educated cosmopolitan who nonetheless lacks any real sense of rootedness or commitment —she is radically altered by Jesusa's fierce resolve to challenge the *status quo* and live out her belief in spiritual revolution. Neither of them, Rizo-Patrón persuades us, is the same after the narrative exchange of the text as before it.

Third, I would like to comment briefly on Rizo-Patrón's reading of my claim, in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, that «understanding and pre-understanding need to get back into dialogue with each other»¹, stressing the decisive role that «pre-understanding» plays in the seeing/thinking of every *theoros*. Does Jesusa ever become a *theoros* in her own right? And, if so, how would her «seeing» differ from that of the three other *theoroi* described in Rizo-Patrón's paper? At one point, Rizo-Patrón cites Jesusa describing herself as trash, material to be discarded, a nobody. Did Jesusa ever come to question her own pre-understanding as she developed more in the role of narrative *theoros*? If, as Rizo-Patrón implies, the *theoros* is a reflective witness of an event, then we could say we are all, potentially, *theoroi* of our own lives: Jesusa, no less than the rest of us. For we all have the ability to distance ourselves from what Husserl called the «natural attitude» of our everyday experiences in order to regard them as «spectacles» ... and, henceforth, to question our seeing. I think that Rizo-Patrón's suggestion here is deeply democratic. For she seems to be implying that one of the gifts of Jesusa's story is to remind us that we are all both performers and spectators of our own lives. Or as Proust would put it, we are both authors and readers of our own lives. Rizo-Patrón shows how in narrating her story to an outsider like Elena Poniatowska in a structured manner over a two-year period, Jesusa was in fact already taking a certain distance from her own life, recalling it as if she were a stranger to herself, and thereby achieving a deeper critical consciousness of the injustices of Mexican society and a certain freedom of action with regard to it. Her iconoclasm is key to this freedom. It certainly seems to have helped her —along with her spiritualist beliefs— transcend and defy the prevailing view that she was mere «trash».

This brings me to my fourth and final comment on the role of the *theoros* suggested by Rizo-Patrón's subtitle —«reflections on/of the testimonial *theoros*». There is an implication here that she, as testimonial and philosophical commentator, is yet another kind of *theoros* (... the fifth kind so far). For if the seeing of the *theoros* is not passive, as Rizo-Patrón shows, but one that partakes in, and helps shape, what is seen, then surely Rizo-Patrón's own pre-understanding operates in her reading of *Hasta No Verte Jesús Mío* about Jesusa's life, and of Poniatowska's meta-testimony about her relationship with Jesusa. Interpreting these «others» (Jesusa and Elena) must also impact back on the interpreter's own interpretative life-world. And this extends further, of course, to us the readers of Rizo-Patrón's interpretation...

Thus we might say that interpreting others' stories teaches us not just about others but equally about our own pre-understanding —the pre-reflective presuppositions, assumptions and prejudices that inform our normal way of seeing. It would certainly seem, for instance, that Rizo-Patrón's own bicultural roots (Peruvian and American) made for a particularly empathic pre-understanding when it came to listening to the narrative of someone from a different cultural and social

¹ Kearney, Richard, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, London/New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 7.

background. This split identity arguably enabled her to better identify with a marginalized and paradoxical figure like Jesusa, while her privileged education as a graduate from a prestigious North American university helped her identify with Elena. This double perspective may well account for some of Rizo-Patrón's unique and specific insights into the story, overlooked by so many other critics and commentators. Indeed one of the deepest lessons we learn from Rizo-Patrón as an ethically engaged *theoros* is to see ourselves not only *as another* (Ricoeur), but also as *being for one another*.

§ 2.

Coming to Brian Treanor's paper —«Judging the Other: Beyond Toleration»— we also confront the hermeneutic question of understanding and pre-understanding. Treanor is worried, correctly in my view, about a certain postmodern tendency to opt for a radical undecidability rather than for judgments guided by universal or «quasi-universal» values of justice, right or goodness. He is concerned with the problem of relativism and irresoluteness in making political and ethical decisions. Citing John Caputo's claim that there can be no agreement about the «person» or the «schemata» of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), Treanor poses this challenging question: «Does this disagreement come down to a difference in first principles, which Aristotle tells us cannot be argued for or proven, but can only be assumed? Are we left with a perspective that is nothing more than faith in one's culture and tradition? Or are there philosophical arguments to be made concerning the validity of conceptions of good and evil in a given culture? Is there a "quasi-universal character" of good and evil grasped by a *cosmopolitan* or *human sensus communis*, and, if so, how could it be demonstrated to the advocates of radical undecidability, paralogy or nihilism that populate the postmodern landscape?»²

Very pertinent questions these, and not easy to answer. I would make just a few brief remarks. First, there is always some element of hermeneutic faith involved in our moral and philosophical judgments. Such faith is not necessarily religious faith. It can, as Merleau-Ponty reminded us, be a specifically philosophical faith in certain presuppositions or goals of reason. Or it can take the form of other secular beliefs—social or political, cultural. But there is rarely, if ever, an operation of pure reason without some kind of faith in the neighborhood. Hermeneutics has always understood this—from Heidegger's «*Vor-verstandnis*» to Gadamer's «pre-judgment» and Ricoeur's «prefiguration». But acknowledging the existence of such prior assumptions and convictions does not mean the abandonment of the need for reasonable critical argument about such values. Gadamer's pre-judgment needs to be brought into dialogue with Habermas' communicative rationality. Or to use Ricoeur's terms, conviction needs to be supplemented by critique. Otherwise the

² Cfr. Treanor, Brian, «Judging the Other: Beyond Toleration», in: this volume, *supra*, p. 321

hermeneutic emphasis on pre-understanding can lapse into relativism or fideism. The second hermeneutic move, therefore, towards some kind of rational and reasonable agreement concerning at least a minimally shared set of values—which I call «quasi-universals»—is, I believe, necessary. And one way of substantiating and sustaining such a move is to work from 1) a phenomenology of comparative value systems, seeking through a rigorous use of «free variation» to arrive at some description of the «quasi-essential» qualities which most human communities share, or can at least agree to subscribe to; and 2) a hermeneutic investigation of the diverse and often competing narrative accounts of right, justice or the good life which may experience a certain possible overlap—what Gadamer called a «fusion of horizons» (*Horizontverschmelzung*), though I personally prefer the term «overlapping of horizons». Thus we aim towards a criss-crossing convergence—however minimal—of multiple different circles, allowing for a certain communality of agreement, even if it never reaches a total consensus. Indeed the achievement of such a totalized consensus would spell the denial of not only democratic difference—premised, as Ricoeur reminds us, on a certain «conflict of interpretations»—but a denial of human finitude itself, which is ineluctably committed to a plurality of views. At the most basic level, this is what undergirds the concrete and pre-reflective function of the *sensus communis*. At its highest level, it provides the mainstay of cosmopolitan global rights at the heart of International Law, from the UN Charter of Human Rights to the International Court at The Hague and the various International crime tribunals. This is by no means an easy dialectic to negotiate. It bids us respect a double fidelity to both particular lived convictions and quasi-universal critique. But it is, I think, a dialectic that neither Brian Treanor nor myself would want to abandon.

§ 3.

Finally, let me come to the third paper, John Manoussakis' «The Fool, the Ugly and the Pervert: Forms of Common Alterity». Manoussakis' basic argument is that the Platonic conflation of the ethical with the aesthetical—under the hyphenated banner of *kalon-agathon*—«binds love to the tyrannical necessity of the beautiful». He concludes accordingly that the role of metaphysical beauty is therefore to be loved, but never (in classical thought at any rate) to love in return. In contrast to this dis-incarnational Platonic model, Manoussakis invokes the Judeo-Christian example of the suffering servant in Isaiah and the Gospels—namely, the one who assumes «otherness through and through, up to the point of ugliness, and foolishness and perversion»³; and thus is free enough to «move beyond the limitation of both aesthetics and ethics»⁴.

³ Manoussakis, John P., «The Fool, the Ugly and the Pervert: Forms of Common Alterity», in: this volume, *supra*, pp. 297-298.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

But why, I would ask, subscribe to such a binary opposition—the good-beautiful-true paradigm of Platonism versus the perverse-ugly-foolish paradigm of Monotheism? Is this really necessary or desirable, apart from its obvious iconoclastic and hyperbolic charge as rhetorical provocation? Is it not rather the case that Isaiah and Jesus seek to dismantle such ruinous dichotomies, showing another way, a middle way which unsettles and disturbs these polarities, by revealing that the last can be first, that the ugly can be beautiful, that the foolish can be wise, and that the perverse (in the sense of the criminally charged) can be exonerated, pardoned or redeemed? It is not necessary, I would argue, to jettison ethics and aesthetics altogether but rather to transfigure them—as Isaiah and Jesus indicate—into 1) a deeper appreciation of what is beautiful (to include what was previously dismissed as ugly, e.g. the oppressed, disabled, weak, dying, neglected) and 2) into a deeper appreciation of what is good (to include many actions and events which certain normative power systems of this world consider illegitimate or illegal—Jesus was crucified because he loved the good too much!). So that what is revealed by Christianity is a good-beyond-ethics and a beauty-beyond-aesthetics, with both ethics and aesthetics being understood here as a restricted understanding of the good and the beautiful.

To abandon the good and the beautiful altogether, as Manoussakis seems to suggest, by identifying one's Messiah exclusively with the ugly, the fool and the pervert, is arguably to lapse into a logic of sublime inversion and hyperbole which has, as I mentioned, a certain cache of shock value with a number of postmodern thinkers such as Baudrillard, Bataille or Žižek. But beyond that it does not have much value, it seems to me, when it comes to a deeper understanding of justice or art. Manoussakis writes: «The secular is governed and regulated by ethics, as it needs to be, but for the sacred, ethics is useless»⁵. If one understands ethics here in the purely Hegelian sense—as Kierkegaard did—then one can see what Manoussakis is getting at. But this is not the understanding of this term in most contemporary thinkers on this subject, including (in terms of our current debate on otherness) Levinas, Ricoeur and myself. I suggest that Manoussakis might be on sounder ground if he had used Levinas' distinction between ethics and morality. For what Manoussakis calls ethics, I (with Levinas and Ricoeur) would call moralism.

Manoussakis speaks finally of a divine love which both forgives and forgets all evil. «In the Church», he concludes, «we do not have criminal records». He explains: «In some sense, for the Church we have no past that weighs down on us, no matter how ugly, foolish or perverted we might have been»⁶. But while most would agree that God can wipe away evil, surely this is too great a power or privilege to claim

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 299.

⁶ *Loc. cit.*

for us *humans* (and since the Church is the people, it is fundamentally human). It is no consolation for victims of clerical child abuse or clerical collaboration with fascist regimes to be told «in the Church we keep no criminal records». What perversions God can forgive, it is not always given for us to forgive. Even Jesus on the Cross could not, it seems, forgive his perverted crucifiers. Hence his appeal to the Father to do so. As human it was too much for him. As a son on earth he had to appeal to the God in and beyond him—the Father in heaven. Can we assume to be better?

Finally, Manoussakis asks, «shouldn't we love only in the dark?» I appreciate the humor of this question of course. But there is also a more serious point. If Manoussakis means that we should love all beings, even those the world considers un-beautiful and un-dignified, then I am fully in agreement. Even if Manoussakis means that we should love pervers, if we understand this to mean we love the pervert in spite of his perversion (following Augustine's distinction between the sinner and the sin). But if it means that evil is just as much part of God as good, then I think it is dangerously close to the Gnostic notion of theodicy: rape, genocide, holocaust, torture, cruelty are all due to divine will. The darkest depravities of history are indispensable aspects of the «labor of the negative» as it unfolds according to a secret logic of salvation. Evil as the «ruse of reason» (Hegel). Evil as the necessary «shadow of God» (Jung). Evil as the «best of all possible worlds» (Leibniz).

This is dangerous stuff in my view, whether it comes from Gnostics, rationalists or those fashionable postmoderns who embrace a cult of trauma, sublimity and transgression such that there is no perversion perverse enough to be judged, condemned or held to account. If that is what is meant by darkness being privileged over light, I dissent. But if, on the contrary, what is meant is that the divine brings its light down into the deepest darkness—of the abyss, of Auschwitz, of Hades—and thereby transfigures the lowest and most abject regions of our existence, then I agree. Indeed, man hath no greater love than this...