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Hybridizing as an Artists' Problem. Some Theses

1. I do not know if all quotations are hybridizations. They certainly are if they are interpreted as being types of assimilations of an otherness, that is not suppressed but is still perceptible. In cases of this type, *quoting* is a bit like capturing a force, but in order to be guided by it. In other cases, however, the quotation appears to be a dogmatic, lazy reflection, like an impersonal or depersonalised adhesion. Which of these types does, or might the title of this presentation belong? Its quotational nature is not evident, I think: my title refers to one of Gottfried Benn's essays *Aging as an Artists' Problem*.¹ An essay of great beauty, which, presumably is not very widely known. By taking Benn's title, my own does not merely reproduce it, it, in fact, deforms it. It acts as a force.

I would like to draw some reflections from this example. First of all, every hybridization should be examined as a *relationship between forces*; and this implies the need for adopting a viewpoint which is capable of describing conflicts, the plurality shape they can take and the results they bring about. We should learn to recognise fertile conflicts, as well as sterile pacifications. In second place, the reference to art needs to be emphasised: if we want to develop a theory of hybridizing, it is in artistic language that we will have to search to find the most stimulating and complex cases.

2. Why do we need a theory of hybridizing? Well, to provide a contrast to ideology, that is to go beyond a poor, schematic debate between the ideology of purity and the ideology of the hybrid. The latter's main claim to existence lies in the opposing ideology. If I were limited to choosing within the field of ideology I would choose - as would all those present, I believe - the direction of hybridization. But I refuse to accept alternatives which are too simple, that is formulated in a

¹ Gottfried Benn, *Altern als Problem für Künstler*, 1953, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Band VI, Klett-Cotta.

language which is simple and stereotyped.

What does the ideology of the hybrid say? It says that hybridization is good and purity is bad. Is this really the case? Must we think that no bad hybridizations exist? I will take my first example from a novel by Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions* (2002), and from the thoughts of one of his characters about the evolution of the language of the cinema:

“That was why I had always instinctively preferred black-and-white pictures to color pictures, silent films to talkies. Cinema was a visual language, a way of telling stories by projecting images onto a two-dimensional screen. The addition of sound and color had created the illusion of a third dimension, but at the same time it had robbed the images of their purity. They no longer had to do all the work, and instead of turning film into the perfect hybrid medium, the best of all possible worlds, sound and color had weakened the language they were supposed to enhance”.²

We must not allow ourselves to be distracted by the extremism of these declarations, an extremism which may lead us to underestimate the most stimulating aspect which is well worth considering. What I mean is that it is perfectly possible for us not to share the judgement of black and white being superior to colour, or of the superiority of silent films to talkies. What we must share, however, I think, is the main standpoint, and that is that hybridization is not a guarantee that “the best of all possible worlds” will be created: it is in fact possible for a hybridization to weaken and impoverish the language – and the world – that it was intended to enhance and enrichen.

This passage from Paul Auster struck me because it goes to confirm a thesis that Nietzsche had put forward and developed clearly and in depth in “Beyond Good and Evil” (1886). In this work Nietzsche speaks of hybridization as a phenomenon which has intensified in modern times. The object he analyses is “the hybrid European man – a reasonably ugly plebeian, all in all”.³ But we ourselves are the ones who are the plebeian. We belong to one of those periods of time in which “races or classes which have been separated from each other a long time suddenly and decisively cross breed”.⁴ The result is “*scepticism*”, or rather a particular type of scepticism, and hybridization, or rather a particular type of hybridization:

² Faber and Faber, London 2002, p. 15.

³ F. Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft*, 1886; *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 223.

⁴ *Ibid.*, aphorism 208.

“For scepticism is the spiritual expression of a certain multi-faceted physiological condition which in everyday language is called weak nerves and sickliness. It arises every time races or classes which have been separated from each other a long time suddenly and decisively cross breed. In the new generation which has inherited in its blood, as it were, different standards and values, everything is restlessness, disturbance, doubt, experiment; the best forces have an inhibiting effect; even the virtues do not allow each other to grow and become strong; the body and soul lack equilibrium, a main focus, a perpendicular self-assurance. But what is most profoundly sick and degenerates in such mixtures (*in solchen Mischlingen*) is the will. (...)”

Paralysis of the will – where nowadays do we not find this cripple sitting! And often how well dressed! In such a seductive outfit! This illness has the most beautifully splendid and deceitful clothing”.⁵

We may well want to question the aetiology, whilst not rejecting the *typology* traced by Nietzsche: there are fertile hybridizations, in which mixture strengthens interwoven elements and forces; but there are also bad hybridizations, sterile hybridizations, where the forces, far from stimulating each other reciprocally, get in each other’s way and paralyse each other. We must, then, avoid the error of believing that the notion of the hybrid is a solution. It constitutes rather *the problem*, one of those great problems which we in our times – whether modern or post modern is of little relevance – must deal with. An ineludible problem. In fact, to return to Nietzsche once more – we modern men, we semi-barbarians, we men set in our sense of history, which is “the sense and instinct for everything, the taste and tongue for everything”, and which is, therefore, “an unworthy sense” (aphorism 224),⁶ we are irresistibly attracted to mixtures. And we can reap great rewards from this: for instance we have access to those civilizations that have not yet completely developed, that are semi-barbarian and that go to make up a considerable percentage of human civilizations, and we can disregard the limits posed by pure aristocratic taste (for example the French of the XVII century, and even their last echo, Voltaire). In this way we can return to enthuse over Homer or Shakespeare,

“that amazing Spanish-Moorish-Saxon synthesis of taste, who would have made an old Athenian, one of Aeschylus’ friend, laugh himself almost to death or irritated him. But we take up this wild range of colours, this confusion of the most delicate, coarsest, and most artificial things with a secret confidence and good will ...”⁷

Perhaps, Nietzsche adds, “the great virtue of our historical sense stands in a necessary opposition to good taste”, in the same way as our “obsequious plebian curiosity” turns out to be completely

5 Ibidem.

6 Ibid., aphorism 224.

7 Ibidem.

incomprehensible to men of aristocratic culture (*ibidem*).⁸

There is no doubt that Nietzsche is on the side of hybridization, but not in an ideological way. He does not merely stop at contrasting the pure with the mixed, the aristocratic with the plebeian: he also proposes distinctions. As I have already hinted, the capacity of making distinctions is the irreplaceable advantage of theory and it is for this reason that it is superior to ideology.

This statement, unfortunately, cannot by any means be taken for granted nowadays: for the past few decades we have been witnessing the continual aggression perpetrated by ideology on any piece of discourse which is conceptually complex. The ideology of the hybrid tries to hide its poverty behind the masks of ethical or political argumentation: *hybridization* does not perhaps mean breaking down barriers, welcoming otherness, tolerance, democracy, etc.? Is hybridization, then, good and non hybridization bad? how can there be any doubt?

Well, I believe that it is necessary not to allow ourselves to be blinded by simplistic ethics. We need to listen to the reasoning of intelligence, because ethics without intelligence is destined to turn against itself.

I propose to start out again from one of Pascal's theses: "Toute nostre dignité consiste en la pensée ... Travaillons donc a bien penser: voilà le principe de la morale".⁹

Here, Pascal refuses to put ethics, or rather the autonomy of ethics, at the top of the list. Ethics which claims to be autonomous runs the risk of becoming *autonomous from intelligence as well*, and therefore, of becoming a type of stupidity.

3. In "*Beyond Good and Evil*", Nietzsche invites us to avoid a series of errors, including methodological ones: and one of these is the error of believing that the spread of mixtures makes distinctions superfluous. To understand this point we have to return to the notion of "frontier". If the term *frontier* were to refer merely to a rigid frontier, something that is oppressively forbidden, then

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ "All our dignity consists in thinking. Let's try to think well: here is the principle of ethics" (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 347, ed. Léon Brunschvigh).

passing that frontier would automatically be a positive, liberating gesture. But this is not the case. We have to set out once more from the polysemy of frontiers and borders, and investigate their strategic functions. And since *distinctions* are frontiers, we will have to ask what a good distinction is. In the short period of time available to me, I will attempt to provide some indications, referring to examples, that we may consider to be *paradigmatic cases*, that is cases that are particularly suitable as illustrations of our problem. But first I would like to state the main ideas I'll discuss in my speech. One theory of hybridization must not favour contamination between levels such as that described by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* (1946) or by Néstor García Canclini in *Culturas híbridas* (1989). Clearly hybridizations of this type do exist but the point being made is different: I believe that a *description based on levels* – I will refer to it in these terms from now onwards – is a rather rough description, which is not able to penetrate the depths of more complex cases.

What I would like to do, on the other hand, is to introduce a *modal* theory of hybridization: *modal* insofar as it refers to thought modes, to ways or styles of thinking. The concept of “style” of course, here does not refer to a series of features ranging from high to low, because in this way we would be returning to the concept of *levels*. From my point of view, styles are what determine divisions in language. I reject, therefore, the concept of style as being ‘expressive’, as style which expresses either a personal or collective identity. To my mind, *style is divided language*.

I would like to refer, first of all, to the text prepared by the organisers of this conference as an introductory document: it is the *Persians* by Aeschilus. I found the reflections in this document to be extremely stimulating and I would like to add my contribution to them. This work by Aeschilus is disconcerting. On the one hand, it reduces the differences between the Greeks and the Persians: the two peoples appear to be very similar above all because they seem to think in the same way – for example, they share their faith in Zeus and the concept, so typically Greek, of *hubris*. To use my own terminology, Aeschilus has removed the separative frontier between the two peoples, between the two cultures. A separative frontier, that is one that has been created by a separative (or disjunctive) thought mode, is a rigid frontier: its function is that of dividing or of opposing. The

basis of identity is searched for in separation.

A conjunctive frontier, however, is a frontier which is not only easy to cross, but in a sense, has *already been crossed*. In this case identity can be found in the relationship with the other, in interaction, in interdependence: not in those properties that enable opposition, and in any case to be well separated one from another, but in relationships. We might say that separative identity is a *property* based identity, whereas conjunctive identity is a *relational* identity.

Precisely because this identity is made of relationships conjunctive identity is particularly unstable, basically unstable. It is destined to experience two principal alternatives: the first is the proliferation of differences, the unilateral triumph of mixtures, the hegemony of chaos. I will call this alternative the *confusive* one, as the thought mode that corresponds to it is *confusive*. The other alternative is to continue the distinction between the mixtures, avoiding a manifestation of the heterogeneous in a mainly accumulative form. I will speak of a *distinctive*, or *strategic* style, to refer to this latter alternative. I use the term *strategic* since strategy is a thought of flexibility, and flexibility is indispensable in a complex relational identity.

In this way we can succeed in also distinguishing between two types of heterogeneity. The first type is accumulative, chaotic, metonymic. Differences become associated with differences, creating an open series which can be extended indefinitely. The second type is based on a plurality of relationships: it avoids, therefore, adherence to a unilateral diet (to quote Wittgenstein).

So, I believe that Aeschilus' work presents us with this very conflict between the two types of heterogeneity that I have just defined. The passage where this appears most obviously is the catalogue.

The *Persians* begins with a catalogue, that is a list of the leaders who have led the great army which had left Asia in the direction of Greece. In this list, where the roar of proper names reflects the roar of battle, heterogeneity is clearly perceptible; as well as the Persians there are Egyptians, Lydians, Babylonians, and other leaders from Mount Tmolos, from Sardis and from Mysia. The similarities between this list and the one to be found in the second book of the *Iliad*, where Homer names the

Greek heroes and their ships, anchored on the shores of Asia, have been noted by critics. At first sight, this may seem to be a further confirmation of Aeschylus' tendency to reduce the differences between peoples. It soon becomes clear, however, that there are differences to be noted. The catalogue of the Persian leaders is to reappear in the first episode, in the *rhesis*, that is in the tale of messenger who announces the destruction of Xerxes' army to the Chorus: the list of names then is what makes us realise the extent of the catastrophe.

What are the causes of the defeat? The Chorus and Queen Atossa wonder about this as well, and also Darius' ghost. Tragedy provides one answer to this question and the answer is *hubris*, arrogance and in this case the drive to expand an empire beyond its plausible limits. This is where we must look to find the reasons for the disaster. However, tragedy, as we know, always provides a double answer to the problems of guilt and excess: it never fails to give a 'human' explanation alongside the 'divine', religious one. It is the Divinity, then, that punished Xerxes, but the blow was delivered to the weakest point, the point of greatest vulnerability in his project of conquest. This point is one of *bad heterogeneity*: excessive heterogeneity where – to go back to Nietzsche's words – “the best forces have an inhibiting effect, even the virtues do not allow each other to grow and become strong” and they paralyse each other reciprocally.

To be more precise, the bad heterogeneity of the Persian army consists of its prevalently accumulative nature: the relationship that dominates is the relationship *à côté*, contiguity. To use a concept from rhetoric, there is a unilateral supremacy for metonymy. We must not, however, think that this chaotic mixture was defeated by Greek purity. The Greeks too are a heterogeneous people, but in a different way. Their heterogeneity recognises the possibility of moulding together and cohering.

That it was this paralysis that condemned the Persian army is clearly indicated in the account of battle of Salamina:

"At first at this point the mass of the Persian force resisted but the bulk of the fleet in a narrow strait was confined and ship could not help ship

but they with their bronze-mouthed rammings
struck each other and broke the banks of oars"
(first episode, vv. 412-416).¹⁰

We can use this military strategy element to reflect on the key metaphor of the work, that is the *yoke* (το ζυγόν). A yoke is something that binds, that ties, that knots: and since heterogeneity is made up of ties it becomes important to consider what kind of ties or yokes they are. Xerxes' ties consist of the bridge of his ships, tied with ropes, thanks to which the Persians crossed the straits of Helle; but an element of violence in this episode seems to be suggested by verse 71:

"a closely-bolted roadway, casting a yoke about the sea's neck"

(πολύγομφον όδισμα ζυγον αμφιβαλων αυχένι πόντου).

Even before the Greeks and Persians come to armed battle, there is a gesture which seems to be excessive: binding the sea and the earth, elements that are too heterogeneous to be bound in a single knot. Here we can see Xerxes' folly – a folly which is later confirmed in his anger with the waves that destroy the first attempts at construction. Xerxes, who orders the sea to be punished, to be thrashed with three hundred lashes, is the emblem of excess, an excess which in turn will also have to be punished.

I believe that it is worth examining the *hubris* of the King in closer detail from the standpoint that I am describing. It is quite obvious to us that Xerxes' hybridization project must be condemned for ethical reasons: this project is based on violence, on the forced subjugation of peoples. This, however, may lead us to think that all hybridizations, as long as they are peaceful ones, are positive and fruitful. This is not the case in the field of the Arts, nor is it true in politics. If we wish to avoid the banality of ideology we have to examine the problem more closely.

Hybridizing means establishing ties, establishing yokes. Yoking diversities. What is it that characterises the Persian Empire's strategy? The nature of the Persian empire is that it is more *hybrid* than Greece; its multiplicity is greater from the quantitative point of view than the Greek multiplicity. This metonymic hybridism is also a technique of domination: the aim being to add

more and more new territories to the Empire and to govern them with a measure of tolerance, without aiming to create a forced homogeneity of them. It is the strategy adopted by many Empires: it consists of paralyzing the conquered peoples and cultures by favouring reciprocal differences. In this way Xerxes' project aimed to subjugate two continents Asia and Europe, by means of ties that were to enable him to *add* – and only to add – Greece to the series of his conquered lands.

If this analysis is correct, then we must conclude that *multiplicity* and *hybridization* – terms which are always given a positive emphasis in post-modern ideology – may hide techniques of oppression and simplification. We must rediscover the polysemy of these terms, and recognise the variety of their functions. What counts, therefore, is the difference between types of hybridization. Greek hybridism has proved to be superior to the Persian variety as it is more flexible and complex, whereas the paralysis strategy used by the Empire towards the peoples of which it consists actually becomes its weak point.

4. I have tried to analyze the problem of *Hubris* from a strategic point of view, and not only from an ethical one. I believe that the work of Aeschylus, and in more general terms Greek tragedy, offers many elements that confirm this research direction, which I would like to go into even further with the help of a second example, *The Tempest* by Shakespeare.

I of course, will need to proceed selectively and schematically. And above all I will be obliged to disappoint many of you, who are used to looking at Caliban as a symbol of Latin America: I'm thinking of Roberto Fernández Retamar's book, which many of you probably agree with.

“Our symbol – writes Retamar in his 1971 essay– is not Ariel, as Rodó thought, but Caliban. IN particular we mestizos, those of us who are natives of the very island where he lived, have a very clear picture of Caliban: Prospero invaded the islands, killed our ancestors and reduced Caliban to slavery teaching him his own language so that they could understand each other. What else can Caliban do except use this language – today he has no other – to curse him, to wish that he would be struck down by the “red plague”? I do not know a more appropriate metaphor for our cultural situation, for our real context.”.

An allegorical political reading of Shakespeare is possible; but it is not the only one and is not, in

my opinion, the most fruitful. It may have great strength for a certain period of time, in a certain historical context, but as time goes by such a reading will inevitably fall into the trap of becoming a stereotype or rather a mental obstacle.

What counts however is to understand what the *methodological defect* is in all readings of this type: this implies what I shall call a *vehicular conception* of the meaning, that is the idea that a text is transmitting a meaning (a message) a little like a car transporting the driver and passengers. Vehicular conception is also a conception of undivided meaning. I support on the other hand, along with Freud and Heidegger, a conception of *divided language*: divided by the thought styles, which are the modes of meaning. My point of view – but, I repeat, I believe that it is a point of view that is shared by the most influential, important authors of the XX century – enables us to develop the theory of hybridization: *hybridizing* does not only mean contaminating levels and vocabularies, but interweaving thought modes. The latter is a type of act, however, which is much more complex than level or lexical hybridizing, and it is much less easy to perceive.

I will now attempt to outline a *modal* interpretation of “The Tempest”, that is an interpretation based on the conflict and the interweaving of styles. First of all, however, we will have to set aside such schemata as ‘nature/culture’ and ‘reality/illusion’, which are so often used by critics. These schemata are misleading. We will also have to abandon our prejudice whereby Prospero is the absolute lord of the island, and he is the one who has the complete control of the situation. Some critics are amazed that, in Act IV, Prospero is overcome by unease at Caliban’s plot, when he, Stephano and Trinculo form an alliance. Is this incoherence on Shakespeare’s part or is it the blindness of the critics? To my mind, there is no doubt: here Shakespeare wishes to show Prospero’s vulnerability, so that the fact that on the island – and in every power relationship – there are no absolute lords. Power is something that can be held, but not possessed, it is something that can be lost at any moment.

There are no absolute lords, but there are ‘relative’ lords, that is when related to those who are dominated by them. I am not forgetting this. Readers of Shakespeare, however, should not forget

that the island where the action unfurls, is said to be a labyrinth (for example Gonzalo says: “Here’s a maze trod, indeed, / through forth-rights and meanders! - *The Tempest*, III, 3, vv. 2-3). And in a labyrinth there are no lords. Once again: there may be partial dominion of the labyrinth, if we see it as being a special, strategic construction. From this point of view, Prospero’s superiority is undeniable. If, however, the labyrinth is a place of transformation, a place where all identities can become *unstable*, and where nobody can extricate himself from this transformation process, then we must conclude that Prospero belongs to the labyrinth much more than the island-labyrinth could ever belong to him.

As you see, I am looking for your forgiveness for my criticism of Retamar by taking inspiration from one of the greatest Latin American writers: my reflection on labyrinths owes much to the marvellous intelligence of Borges. If, then, we decide to take the labyrinth as the *principal isotopy* of the work, our perspective must move a long way away from a political or ideological reading of any type.

Is “The Tempest” an allegory? Yes, but not simply a ‘vehicular’ one, whose content or reference is simply colonial dominion. We must not reduce the richness of Shakespeare’s work to this. To go back to the idea of the labyrinth as a place of transformation for the identity, another aspect which is mentioned by Gonzalo: in this island, he says, “Ferdinand ... found a wife / where he himself was lost (...) and all of us ourselves / when no man was his own” (V, 1, vv. 210-213). Why should these transformation processes not apply to Prospero as well? And yet the most important transformation is not that of an ethical nature, consisting in renouncing the desire for vengeance on a brother who is a usurper, but is the change with reference to Caliban.

I do not believe that the famous phrase “this thing of darkness I / acknowledge mine” (V.1, vv. 275-276) is to be taken as being a claim to property: it is rather that we have the chance to see that identity (of the most complex characters, but also of every human being) is a hybridizing and a translation process. Let’s consider Caliban’s perspective first of all.

Caliban does not use the language he has learned from Prospero only to curse: it enables him to

express complex sentiments, which bring him up to the same height as his master. I would like to propose an analogy. In perhaps the most well known chapter of *“Phenomenology of Spirit, “Mastership and Servitude”*, Hegel shows how a servant can, by means of his work, bring about the conditions for a reversal of roles. If we replace work with language and consider the problem from a Lacanian and not only a Hegelian viewpoint, we can assert that the meeting with language is a process of temporary – and necessary – alienation which paves the way for unforeseeable options. It has been observed by the critics that Caliban is able to speak in verse, unlike his peers Stephano and Trinculo: an indication of his developing personality. I believe that we may claim, therefore, that the hybridization with others has brought about an enriching, and not only loss.

I do not mean, in saying this, to minimize the violence of colonial invasion, if that is what Shakespeare’s work is alluding to. There is no doubt that, the meeting with a violent other is in no way to be wished for and it would have been better if it had never happened. But since it has happened, it is essential to reflect on the conditions of potential rebellion. Well, why does Caliban’s rebellion fail? What is missing? Books. Prospero’s books. Two considerations can be made about this: the first is that Prospero’s power seems to be connected in a determining manner to a dimension which is external to his persona; that is what makes him vulnerable; the second is that a rebellion could have been successful if it had not aimed at the destruction of the books, as Caliban has in mind and as he asks Stephano (*“Burn but his books”*, III. 2, v. 90), but had aimed, instead, at assimilation.

At this point I believe I can introduce what is perhaps my most surprising thesis: Prospero’s hybridism. Prospero dominates Caliban – and he takes his revenge on his brother Antonio – not based on the purity of his culture, but thanks to the hybridization that only the island has been able to bring about for him. The text does not say this explicitly. How, though, was it possible for such a powerful wizard to be dispossessed? In Milan, evidently, his magic was still too weak. Perhaps because his studies had not yet gone far enough? Or perhaps because his books were not efficacious? Prospero had isolated himself: in what? I believe that we will have to answer that he

had isolated himself in *monostyle*, in *monotropia*. Paradoxically, it is in a place which is even more isolated that he acquires his powers: at the height of his solitude he is lucky enough to meet Caliban, the Dionysian energy that he lacked.

Caliban introduces him to the island's secrets:

“ and then I loved thee,
and showed thee all the qualities o' th' isle,
the fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile” (I.2., vv. 337-339).

Between Prospero and Caliban, then, there was an *unequal exchange* which is much more to Prospero's advantage and which enables him to establish his dominion over Caliban, whilst it enriches Caliban as well at the same time. What counts is that *both characters are hybrids*: the both their identities come from the relationship with the otherness. Both identities consist of translating their own language into the language of the other.

In this way Prospero learns to go beyond the separative concept of language, he understands that the Symbolic (in Lacan's sense of the word) must be interwoven with the other registers and must be able to absorb at least partly the force of what is absolutely foreign to it: not only the foreignness or otherness of Ariel, which is easy to tame, but also Caliban's untamable energy- It is only because he absorbs Caliban, in fact, that Prospero becomes what he is. His phrase: “this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine” is the recognition of this basic debt.

As you can see, I have emphasised “*the Tempest*” as an allegory of a work of art, and not as a political allegory. But political reflection could have much to learn, I believe, from the analysis of works of art: good heterogeneousness, true flexibility, the way towards strategic mixtures.