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# Introduction

## a) An introduction to Zolla

In this essay, which is a short summary of the Italian PhD thesis, I would like to examine the complexity of Zolla's thought by systematizing his approach to the fields of study he was interested in.

Zolla (1926-2002) is an Italian intellectual, whose interests are euphemistically speaking, really broad<sup>1</sup>. He was for many years professor of Anglo-American literature at La Sapienza (Rome), but his works are only partially concerning his field of study. Literature, critical philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, history of religions, neo-platonic philosophy, alchemy, esotericism, mysticism, oriental philosophy, represent his intellectual horizon.

All these different fields are linked together by an ethical-metaphysical perspective: they are tools that enable Zolla to find a kind of knowledge which is immediately also a way of life. The center of his production is therefore the idea that no knowledge is worth being explored, if it doesn't turn into a change of the human being as a whole. This change consists in the overcoming of every contingency, in order to become a pure, naked, presence; which means, in summary, to be natural at the highest degree: to be nature itself, to be at the same time the subject that knows, the object known and knowledge itself.

It is not the aim of this essay to provide much information about Zolla's life, at least for three reasons: on one side, there already is a good intellectual biography, which describes the most important stages of Zolla's life, connecting them to his intellectual production<sup>2</sup>; on the other side, there are not many studies about Zolla's thought and it is therefore necessary to focus on his writings, in order to really understand his philosophical perspective<sup>3</sup>; finally, if it's true that his philosophy implies a way of life,

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<sup>1</sup> A short but rich English presentation of Zolla's life and works can be found in G. Marchianò, *Zolla Elémire*, in: L. Jones (ed.) *Encyclopedia of religion*, vol. 14, Macmillan, New York 2005, pp. 9984-9987.

<sup>2</sup> See G. Marchianò, *Il conoscitore di segreti. Una biografia intellettuale*, Marsilio, Venezia 2012. See also the following interview: E. Zolla, D. Fasoli, *Un destino itinerante*, Marsilio, Venezia 1995.

<sup>3</sup> The best overviews on Zolla's production can be found in: G. Marchianò, *Il conoscitore di segreti*, cit; H. A. Cavallera, *Elémire Zolla: la luce delle idee*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2011. See also: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Dizionario zolliano di parole-chiave*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 1, 2012, which is a fundamental hermeneutical tool, in order to comprehend some important Zolla's categories; L. Morelli, *Elémire Zolla. Tradizione e critica sociale*, Historica Edizioni, Cesena 2019, which is focused on the early years of Zolla's production and stress the importance of the notion of Tradition.

this way of life, as I will underline, is independent from the biographical data, since it concerns a dimension of the human being that exceeds space and time, that exceeds «il condizionamento di essere stati partoriti a una certa data da una certa madre»<sup>4</sup>.

However, since Zolla may not be known by an English-speaking audience, I will report here a small autobiography published in 1990 by the author, which may be helpful in knowing the most important events in his life:

nacque a Torino il 9 luglio 1926 [...] Zolla crebbe isolato nella casa paterna, parlando naturalmente inglese, francese e italiano, studiando in seguito il tedesco e lo spagnolo. Dipingeva e suonava il pianoforte. Messo a scuola, imparò l'arte di fingere, di occultare i sentimenti, dispregiò quanti gli stavano d'attorno. Non incontrò se non fascisti in Italia; lo sollevava l'espatrio frequente, il soggiorno in Inghilterra o a Parigi. Cominciò a leggere fitto; a scuola riuscì facilmente. Fu in Italia durante la guerra, uno dei rari periodi di quieta ricchezza per suo padre; notò che a poco a poco la gente diventava meno fascista. Ricorda l'arrivo degli alleati a Torino, esattamente come l'aveva immaginato da dieci anni. Seguì la facoltà di Legge a Torino, che aveva qualche professore capace, e anche qualche sperimentatore di sciocchezze strutturalistiche. A ventidue anni si ammalò di tisi e fu per morire; durante la malattia scrisse un romanzo, che uscì nel 1956: *Minuetto all'inferno* (Einaudi) ed ebbe il premio Strega opera prima. Aveva parecchio stampato negli anni precedenti, sulla rivista «Letterature moderne» di Flora e «Il pensiero critico» di Cantoni, in seguito sullo «Spettatore italiano» e infine a partire dal 1957, su «Tempo Presente». Erano saggi sui maggiori autori del Novecento, che egli tentava di riunire in una specie di luogo ideale, distante dalle contaminazioni politiche; escluse la presenza, fra loro, di Joyce. Gli scrissero Eliot e Thomas Mann, per consentire. Nel 1957 si trasferì a Roma, dove per breve tempo ebbe parte nella redazione di «Tempo Presente». È di allora un nuovo romanzo, *Cecilia o la disattenzione* (Garzanti). La raccolta dei suoi saggi, in parte ispirati alla Scuola di Francoforte, *L'eclissi dell'intellettuale* (Bompiani 1959, premio Crotone), ebbe parecchie riedizioni e traduzioni. Era una negazione, destinata a non poter essere generalmente accettata, di tutto il sistema dell'industria culturale, nel quale si rifletteva la tendenza del pensiero nato dopo il capovolgimento hegeliano. L'opera formulava il sottinteso invito ad abbandonare il mondo quale è stato conformato dal potere di questo pensiero: i maggiori autori degli ultimi due secoli sono stati capaci di questo esodo. L'anno dell'uscita di quel libro era cruciale: Zolla fu anche chiamato a insegnare all'Università di Roma, specie per intervento di Mario Praz, e incontrò Cristina Campo, con la quale visse fino alla morte di lei nel 1977. Uscirono varie opere negli anni successivi, specie un'antologia, *I mistici dell'Occidente* (Garzanti 1963). La tradizione mistica era qui documentata come il luogo segreto dove si era affermata nei millenni l'uniformità permanente di una metafisica immutabile, negazione radicale del mondo in quanto tale, ancor prima che esso assumesse l'aspetto moderno. Presso Bompiani uscirono i saggi successivi: *Storia del fantasticare e Le potenze dell'anima*. Nel 1966 Zolla vinse il concorso a cattedra e andò nel 1967 a insegnare a Catania, per passare quindi a Genova, dove rimase fino al 1974, insegnando oltre a letteratura angloamericana anche filologia germanica. Nel 1968 da un viaggio nel Sudovest degli Stati Uniti ricavò una storia dell'immagine dell'Indiano, *I letterati e lo sciamano* (Bompiani 1969). L'opera ebbe una risonanza notevole negli Stati Uniti. Il periodo che andò dal 1968 al 1980 vide Zolla isolato e aborrito in Italia dalla classe che aveva afferrato il potere; egli si dedicò a viaggi in India, in Indonesia, in Corea e soprattutto in Iran. A poco a poco, dopo la pubblicazione di *Che cos'è la tradizione* (1971) e della vasta dissertazione alchemica *Le meraviglie della natura* (1975), cessarono i rapporti con Bompiani. Rimase viva però, in qualche modo, la collaborazione al «Corriere della Sera». Zolla tornò con notevoli opposizioni a insegnare all'Università di Roma nel 1974. Cominciò a scrivere in inglese. Uscì in Inghilterra e in America *Archetypes* (1981), seguito da *The Androgyne* (1981). Dopo il 1980 in Italia mutò la situazione politica, l'opposizione a Zolla parve in gran parte dissolversi. Egli sposò nel 1980

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<sup>4</sup> E. Zolla (1994), *Lo stupore infantile*, Omnia, Marsilio, Venezia 2014, p. 47.

Grazia Marchianò. Riprese a scrivere in italiano e uscirono presso Marsilio *Aure* (quattro edizioni, 1985), *L'amante invisibile* (premio Ascoli Piceno, 1987), *Archetipi* (Premi Isola d'Elba e Mircea Eliade, 1988), *Verità segrete esposte in evidenza* (1990). Aveva diretto dal 1969 al 1983 una rivista, cui fece collaborare gli autori che gli parvero in qualche modo salvarsi dalla generale decadenza, «Conoscenza religiosa» (La Nuova Italia), e in quel periodo formulò la metafisica esposta in *Archetipi*, essa gli parve il dono che poteva lasciare, soluzione rigorosa e pacificante d'ogni questione filosofica, capace di salvare dall'influsso delle ideologie moderne e di far partecipare alla gioia che dalla maturità in poi egli sentì pervadere la sua vita<sup>5</sup>.

## b) Methodology and structure of the essay

Since there is not much literature about this author, I will provide a broad overview on Zolla's work. I'll try to provide an interpretation, which is able to let the texts talk, in order to define, on the basis of these texts, the form of Zolla's intellectual perspective. In this regard, I will, on one side, do a chronological analysis of his intellectual development, but, on the other side, I will stress the fact that, in order to really understand Zolla's proposal, it is necessary to look at his writings as a whole, i. e.: in an organic and synchronic way.

As already mentioned, the key that allows to examine this vast bibliographical production is the central experience of the "naked presence", which summarizes both the ethical aspect and the metaphysical one.

In the bibliography, I will provide all the translations of Zolla's books that I have found; I will also quote some of his articles and books that are not analysed in this dissertation, in order to provide the reader with a wide selection of writings.

In the first chapter, I will examine the historical and philosophical background of Zolla's intellectual production, in order to elucidate his methodology, the "development" of his thought through the years and his main sources.

In the first place, I will analyse his implicit methodology, which has to be inferred by the structure of his texts, by the progression over time of his interests, by his considerations about other authors' literary works, by some unsystematic and general claims. If all these different sources are taken into account, it is possible to enlighten the intellectual framework that binds all the fields of studies Zolla was interested in, and, more generally, his intellectual approach as a whole.

Secondly, I will provide an overview on Zolla's works, trying at the same time to follow a diachronic and synchronic perspective. On one side, it is important to understand the development of Zolla's thought over the years and to identify some particularly relevant time steps for the development of

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<sup>5</sup> The text was published by Zolla in 1990 (*Autodizionario degli autori italiani*). I took the quote from G. Marchianò, *Il conoscitore di segreti*, cit., pp. 25-27.

his thought. On the other side, it is also necessary to look at Zolla's production from a synchronic perspective, since his thought can't be simply seen as a stream that starts from a point, follows a linear path and comes to an end. On the contrary, it must be understood as a circular thought, that tries to reach its invisible and ineffable center, starting from many different standpoints, as if these standpoints were certainly able to provide a specific overview of the center, but also insufficient if not interconnected with one another<sup>6</sup>.

Thirdly, I will provide a short overview on his sources. In this case, it will not be possible to analyse each and every source, because the extent of this research would lead us far beyond the aim of this essay. Anyway, I will provide the fundamental tools to understand Zolla's cultural horizon, by classifying his sources into six macro-categories: moralism, Platonism, mysticism, alchemy, shamanism, Eastern philosophy.

The second chapter examines Zolla's critique of modern society and modern subjectivity.

First of all, I will analyse Zolla's critique of modern reason. This critique, which can be understood as a development of the Frankfurt School's theses, allows to better understand the bond that links the modern idea of reason with the emergence of a new kind of subjectivity. In Zolla's opinion, modern subjects, especially due to the identification of reason and calculation, turn out to be characterized by a lack of vitality. This lack of vitality finds its most relevant expression in Sade's literary works, which can be interpreted as a realistic depiction of the modern human condition. Reason, alienation and violence are, in this sense, strictly connected.

Secondly, I will better analyse Zolla's anthropology. In this respect, the author finds that modern subjectivity is confined in a triangular prison that prevents it from an opening to something beyond the identification with the psychological "I" and with the social "person". Zolla identifies body-sensation, soul-emotions and reason as the three elements of this prison.

Thirdly, I will focus my attention on the notions of "I" and "person", in order to better understand the meaning of this triangular prison. In summary, the analysis of the two notions shows that a subject that is identified with them is a dimidiated subject, since he/she has lost the perception of his/her multidimensionality and has become a one-dimensional subject.

In the last paragraph of this chapter, I will examine the process that leads to this one-dimensional subject. I will show that this process has to do, paradoxically, with a kind of doubling, with a self-consciousness that prevents from the possibility of overcoming one's own "I" in order to get in touch

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<sup>6</sup> It is therefore important to remember what Marchianò says about Zolla's thought. She claims that it is «strutturato come una *mandala* le cui linee di fuga confluiscono al centro, rastremandosi nel punto più interno» (G. Marchianò, *Il conoscitore di segreti*, cit., p. 96).

with one's own Self and with the world around. The faculty that produces this captivity is, according to Zolla, fancy. Fancy means to be stuck in reveries, that strengthen the most important reverie/illusion: the reverie of "I" itself.

In the third chapter, I will analyse the way out of this prison through a rediscovery of imagination and intellectual intuition. These are to be understood as two human "faculties", that open up to a multidimensional idea of subjectivity.

Firstly, I will examine the notion of "spirit" as a useful category, which helps to understand the idea of an impersonal subject. I will show, that, following Zolla, it is possible to think of a subject, that, by being impersonal, can finally reach his/her own integrity, his/her own deeper Self, his/her real freedom.

Secondly, I will analyse the categories of "imagination" and "intellectual intuition", which can be seen as the overcoming and the fulfilment of fancy and reason.

Finally, I will examine how the experience of the subject-object identity - which is the definition of intellectual intuition and, more generally, of mysticism - may provide a different horizon in the understanding of the human being.

# 1. Historical and philosophical background

## a) Zolla's underlying methodology

In order to understand Zolla's work, it is in the first place necessary to examine if it is possible to find a methodological red thread that holds together his wide production, which ranges from novels to essays, from journal articles to travel reports, from linguistic studies to critical researches on modern society and subjectivity, from cosmology to musicology, psychoanalysis and mysticism. The extent of these interests makes it really difficult to find a bond that holds them together. However, if we manage to identify a common underlying methodology, then it would hopefully become easier to understand this author<sup>7</sup>.

First of all, even at a superficial glance, it appears clear that the extent of his interests reflects on his methodology, which therefore presents many levels of complexity. These levels must be explored by taking into account at the same time the entire intellectual production in its progression and the invisible paths that link the writings to one another. Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand his intellectual patterns, which are not linear, but circular, or, better, spiral-shaped.

We may use some words, that Zolla writes in 1981 to describe poetry, in order to give a description of Zolla's method itself:

il poeta si spinge fino all'originarietà dell'essere, di solito non offre perciò formule concettuali, ma ci distrae introducendoci in un labirinto di relazioni simmetriche, non per il suo piacere estetico di percorrerlo, ma perché una mente meditativa non può credere che la verità si possa esprimere in una lingua lineare, ordinaria, inerte e seccamente logica<sup>8</sup>.

The main aim of Zolla's work is not to provide some categories nor to give easy answers, but to create a maze of words that helps to get rid of words themselves.

A first attempt, what may help to find the way around this maze of words, ideas, cultures and perspectives on reality, could be to draw a line that splits Zolla's works into two broad categories: a

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<sup>7</sup> An attempt to systematize Zolla's production has been done by Cavallera. Cavallera divides Zolla's thought into three categories, which are also three different periods of time (H. A. Cavallera, *Elémire Zolla: la luce delle idee*, cit., p. 91): 1. critique of modern society, 2. the intellectual intuition (mysticism) as a way out of Western world, 3. detachment from any contingency. See also G. Marchianò, *Il conoscitore di segreti*, cit., pp. 65-68.

<sup>8</sup> E. Zolla (1981, 1988), *Archetipi*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Archetipi, Aure, Verità segrete, Dioniso errante. Tutto ciò che conosciamo ignorandolo, Omnia*, Marsilio, Venezia 2016, pp. 35-185, p. 165. See also: E. Zolla, *The poet as a myth-maker and shaman*, in: R. Hagenbüchle, L. Skandera (eds.), *Poetry and epistemology. Papers from the International Poetry Symposium*, Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg 1983, pp. 424-434.

part of the intellectual production that can be called *pars destruens* and a part that provides the complementary *pars construens*<sup>9</sup>.

On one side, the publications between the Fifties and the Seventies are influenced by Adorno and Horkheimer's critical theory and can be therefore interpreted as the *pars destruens*<sup>10</sup>, whereas the Eighties and the Nineties are more influenced by Eastern philosophies<sup>11</sup>, in which Zolla finds a new "construction", useful to better understand both Western society and Western subjectivity<sup>12</sup>. On the other side, many of his books are actually divided into a critical part and a more constructive one<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, both if we look at his production as a whole or at the structure of many of his books, we may have the impression that Zolla's method consists in this dialectic between a critical part and a constructive one.

Although it is undeniable that Zolla thinks in terms of deconstruction-construction, I would nevertheless suggest that this distinction is too simple and precludes us from a deeper comprehension of the way Zolla thinks and writes.

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<sup>9</sup> From the modern period onwards, these two categories have been used to describe the philosophical process itself. See, for instance, Descartes: Ch. Adam, P. Tannery (eds.), *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 12 voll., Vrin, Parigi, 1964-1974, [I. ed.: 1887-1913]: AT, VI, 13-18 and AT VII, 8-9. Agamben criticizes this approach and says that *pars destruens* and *pars construens* can't be thought one without the other (See: G. Agamben, *L'uso dei corpi*, in: G. Agamben, *Homo sacer. Edizione integrale 1995-2015*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2018, p. 1011). For the dialectic *destruens-construens* in Zolla, see: G. Marchianò, *Il conoscitore di segreti*, cit., p. 62; G. Marchianò, *Introduzione*, in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, p. XII.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance: E. Zolla, *La musicologia di T. W. Adorno*, in «Rivista di Estetica», n. 1, settembre-dicembre 1957, pp. 405-414; E. Zolla, *Prefazione*, in: D. De Sade, *Le Opere*, Longanesi, Milano 1961, pp. 11-65; E. Zolla, *Adorno tra metacritica e metafisica*, in «Elsinore», num. 5, aprile 1964, pp. 43-57.

<sup>11</sup> Zolla states to have been interested in Eastern thought since he was a child (See: E. Zolla, *Tibet mon amour*, in «Corriere della Sera», 21 ottobre 1999, article republished by G. Marchianò with the title *Tibet: una miracolosa assenza di fede* in: E. Zolla, *Gli arcani del potere*, a cura di G. Marchianò, Bur, Milano 2009, pp. 207-209). However, it is especially with *Aure* (E. Zolla (1985), *Aure*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Archetipi, Aure, Verità segrete, Dioniso errante. Tutto ciò che conosciamo ignorandolo*, Omnia, Marsilio, Venezia 2016) that Zolla turns to East. In the interview published in 1995, Zolla states (E. Zolla, D. Fasoli, *Un destino itinerante*, cit., p. 78): «la svolta di *Aure* fu decisiva perché mi portò fuori di una falsità cui avevo in parte aderito per debolezza o confusione, non so: la sudditanza al pensiero europeo».

<sup>12</sup> See: E. Zolla, *Aure*, cit., pp. 189-345; E. Zolla (1995), *Le tre vie. Soluzioni sovrumane in terra indiana*, Marsilio, Omnia, Marsilio, Venezia 2019; E. Zolla (1999), *La filosofia perenne. L'incontro fra le tradizioni d'Oriente e d'Occidente*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Filosofia perenne e mente naturale*, Omnia, Marsilio, Venezia 2013, pp. 113-354.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, E. Zolla (1968), *Le potenze dell'anima. Vie alla riforma interiore. Dal disincanto al risveglio*, Omnia, Marsilio, Venezia 2020.

However, in an article written in 1956, Zolla says, referring to Benjamin's thought, that «a far scaturire l'*Ursprung* ogni atto intellettuale dovrà essere ordinato, come al suo autentico fine»<sup>14</sup>. If we take this claim seriously, it should mean that, in Zolla's opinion, every intellectual activity must be seen as an attempt to find the ultimate origin of the topic analysed, be it an author, a literary work, a philosophy, a different culture, Western society, Western subjectivity, etcetera. Even when he is criticising, even when he is deconstructing the way in which modern society reflects on itself, even when he seems to leave nothing but ruins after his passage, he is actually constructing the possibility of the emergence of an alternative. In other words, critique is not something that precedes construction, but it is construction itself, as well as construction is critique itself. Getting rid of all illusions, deconstructing each and every image, that precludes the direct knowledge of a subject of study, means to let arise what is covered, what is underneath. It means to open up to the possibility of an act of attention.

In other words, even deconstruction is the construction of a place where attention may arise<sup>15</sup>:

il pensiero dev'essere soltanto critica, mai ricerca di precetti o consigli, poiché si può solo eliminare dalla visione gli ostacoli, non trasformare la luce nella sua formula. La critica distrugge gli ostacoli all'attenzione, l'attenzione vede il reale, l'azione nasce spontanea dalla visione del reale<sup>16</sup>.

Therefore, if we try to define critique, we can state that it is a way of paying attention to something that usually we don't pay attention to. By the mere fact that we are really taking into account a subject of study – be it a literary piece, a social or individual construction, a way of thinking or behaving –, it arises the possibility of a deeper comprehension.

Therefore, different categories must be found, in order to understand Zolla's method. In this regard, it could be useful to highlight a distinction he draws in an article about F. Kafka, written in 1954:

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<sup>14</sup> E. Zolla, *Walter Benjamin*, in «Lo spettatore italiano», num. 1, gennaio 1956, pp. 24-27, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> At least since 1958, when Zolla writes an article on Simone Weil, the category of "attention" has been fundamental for his thought (see: E. Zolla, *Simone Weil*, in «Questioni», num. 5-6, settembre-novembre 1958, pp. 24-32); the concept of "attention" comes both from Simone Weil and from Christian tradition, Particularly, Zolla refers to hesychasm and its attentional practices (see: E. Zolla, *L'escicismo*, in: E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell'Occidente*, vol. 1, Adelphi, Milano 2010, pp. 626-632; Niceforo l'escicasta, *Metodo della santa attenzione*, in: E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell'Occidente*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 633-634).

<sup>16</sup> E. Zolla (1959), *Eclissi dell'intellettuale*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Il serpente di bronzo. Scritti antesignani di critica sociale*, Omnia, Marsilio, Venezia 2015, pp. 33-206, p. 94.

la ricostruzione della sua [di Kafka] persona deve costituire solo un primo gradino nella lenta comprensione della sua opera, del complesso pensiero che quella persona-maschera cela dietro di sé, della *gymné psyché*, dell'anima nuda che s'impresse nelle opere<sup>17</sup>.

The relation between real face and mask seems to be a deeper and more productive hermeneutical key, a key that provides an important tool to better understand how Zolla analyses his subjects. He suggests in this article to focus at the same time on what appears on the surface of a phenomenon, on what is underneath and on the relation between the underlying truth and the surface. This means that truth as a whole has to be reached by taking into account the triadic dialectic among core, surface and relation, not by staying on the surface nor by overlooking the surface in order to reach the core.

Both in the case of the dialectic *destruens-construens* and in the relation between face and mask, we can underline a strong polarisation in Zolla's way of understanding reality: he prefers to develop his thought by finding differences right there, where everything seems to be similar. He tries to look at reality from opposite standpoints, in order to clarify what at first sight is invisible.

Therefore, the dialectics *destruens-construens* and face-mask can be seen as special cases of the more general method of polarisation, which allows Zolla to better outline the topic under discussion. In this sense, polarisation can be seen as a proper *dispositif*<sup>18</sup>, that allows to analyse a subject by means of

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<sup>17</sup> E. Zolla, *La maschera e il volto di Franz Kafka*, in «Letterature moderne», num. 2, marzo-aprile 1954, pp. 151-159, p. 151.

<sup>18</sup> We can understand under *dispositif* an extremely complex and multilayer research tool, that can be helpful in better untangling the complexity of reality. Every *dispositif* assumes a specific standpoint from which it tries to understand reality. This concept, developed by Foucault, was firstly recalled by Deleuze (G. Deleuze, *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif* (1989), in G. Deleuze, *Deux régimes des fous. Textes et entretien 1975-1995*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 2003, pp. 316-325) and then by Agamben, who says (G. Agamben, *Che cos'è un dispositivo?*, Nottetempo, Roma 2006, pp. 21-22): «generalizzando ulteriormente la già amplissima classe dei dispositivi foucauldiani, chiamerò dispositivo letteralmente qualunque cosa abbia in qualche modo la capacità di catturare, orientare, determinare, intercettare modellare, controllare e assicurare i gesti, le condotte, le opinioni e i discorsi degli esseri viventi. Non soltanto, quindi, le prigioni, i manicomi, il Panopticon, le scuole, la confessione, le fabbriche, le discipline, le misure giuridiche ecc., la cui connessione col potere è in un certo senso evidente ma anche la penna, la scrittura, la letteratura, la filosofia, l'agricoltura, la sigaretta, la navigazione, i computers, i telefoni cellulari e - perché no - il linguaggio stesso, che è forse il più antico dei dispositivi, in cui migliaia e migliaia di anni fa un primate – probabilmente senza rendersi conto delle conseguenze cui andava incontro - ebbe l'incoscienza di farsi catturare.» In analysing Zolla's method, I'm not really interested in focusing on the potential coercive nature of every *dispositif*, but rather on its potentiality as a moving map (G. Deleuze, *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif*, cit., pp. 316-317), that, by tracing the contours, shapes what it is dealing with, or better, lets emerge the intrinsic form of the subject of study.

an accurate fine-tuning. In order to understand the general *dispositif* of polarisation, it may be useful to give an example from *Eclissi dell'intellettuale* (1959).

In this book published in 1959, Zolla compares the mass-man to the gambler, that is understood as his archetype<sup>19</sup>. By shaping this archetype, he is not satisfied with simply enumerating the gambler's peculiarities and with linking them to the mass-man's traits<sup>20</sup>. He introduces a new character, the warrior's archetype, as the gambler's opposite. This polarisation between two opposite archetypes allows Zolla to emphasize the gambler's peculiarities. Opposition-polarisation is, in this sense, a way of better understanding the opposite poles and the relation between them.

Through a parallel analysis of these two archetypes, Zolla manages to show both the similarities and the differences; he manages, in one word, to reshape both the figures, so as to better understand them. At first sight, the gambler and the warrior appear to be really similar: both of them follow some rules, both of them appear to be self-forgetful, both of them rely on fate. Nevertheless, these similarities turn into differences at a closer look:

1. the gambler plays by the rules in a mechanical way, whereas the warrior has become the rules he applies. In other words: the gambler annihilates himself in the rules, whereas the warrior is himself the rules he is acting; this means that, through the medium of the rules, the warrior finds the path towards the unity between himself and action;
2. the gambler is depersonalised because he has turned his acts into an automatism, whereas the warrior is non-personal in the sense that he is at the heart of himself: he has become the impassive witness of himself. On one side, the gambler is impersonal in the sense that he acts like an automaton by accepting the split between his own actions and luck; on the other side, the warrior is impersonal, in that he forgets the division between himself and reality, and accepts to «affidarsi al destino senza voler agire meccanicamente su di esso»<sup>21</sup>;
3. the gambler relies on destiny, but the gambler's destiny is to be understood as hazard, whereas the warrior's destiny is the divine will that arises from his actions.

Therefore, the opposites that at first sight could appear similar, turn out to be really different and, by underlining these differences, new and unpredictable aspects emerge from both the realities that are compared.

In the end, polarisation, as the first *dispositif* of Zolla's methodology, can be defined as a microscopic approach that tries to understand one subject by comparing it with its opposite, in order to better

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<sup>19</sup> See E. Zolla, *Eclissi dell'intellettuale*, cit., pp. 193-195.

<sup>20</sup> On the mass-man in Zolla, see L. Bini, *L'uomo massa di E. Zolla*, in «Lecture», num. 10, ottobre 1961, pp. 643-65.

<sup>21</sup> E. Zolla (1959), *Eclissi dell'intellettuale*, cit., p. 195.

understand both the poles and their relation. In this sense, the two poles are always co-present, because one needs the other to become clear; moreover, both are not only linked but also established by the relation they have with one another. In other words, there can't be knowledge of the real face without the mask, there is no *pars destruens* without its opposite and vice-versa; it is not possible to know the archetype of the gambler without knowing the warrior's one. Knowledge is this pendular movement that allows to reach deeper shades of the subject analysed by comparing it with its opposite and by underlying the difference right there, where it seems to be identity or similarity. It is exactly in the details that the way to the core of the topic may be found.

A second important *dispositif* can be called the *dispositif* of multiplication. In this case, the same theme is investigated from many different perspectives, that allow to be flexible and not to focus on only one interpretation. In Zolla's opinion, it is really important to not become attached to one perspective, because he thinks that each and every point of view can be enriched by other different points of view. However, this doesn't mean, in Zolla's terms, that there is no truth, but only interpretations. On the contrary, it means that truth can't be trapped in the meshes of any language, i. e. of any interpretation of reality. At the same time, it also means that every kind of language may provide a particular starting point, from which it is then possible to overcome language itself and reach the truth<sup>22</sup>: «il punto centrale d'una dottrina si raggiunge da infiniti punti di vista contraddittori e concorrenti»<sup>23</sup>. The multiplication of languages and perspectives enables the researcher to reach a non-linguistic dimension that each and every language-interpretation can only suggest:

la verità si lascia accostare soprattutto da una ditirambica ebbrezza linguistica, in cui sinonimi e similitudini sgorgano con un incalzare incontenibile e il ritmo a spirale spinge innanzi il flusso di invenzioni metaforiche, finché una forza ignota, trascendente, glossolalica assume la direzione del discorso: allora, come l'estro aumenta, vorticosamente si restringe la distanza fra lo scintillio verbale e la realtà denotata<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> See, about language, E. Zolla (1990), *Verità segrete esposte in evidenza. Sincretismo e fantasia. Contemplazione ed esotericità*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Archetipi, Aure, Verità segrete, Dioniso errante. Tutto ciò che conosciamo ignorandolo*, Omnia, Marsilio, Venezia 2016, pp. 349-506, p. 447: «le parole sono sempre ostaggi; appena concesse al mondo profano, subito questo ne fa reti, gabbie. Come preservare il significato dalla fatale sorte d'ogni significante? Consiglio di cambiare costantemente la parola. Che il pomeriggio non ci sorprenda ad usare la parola del mattino [...] più si varierà il termine, più rimarrà incrollabile il significato; più si girerà intorno all'oggetto, meno si sarà vittime di illusioni ottiche, di giochi d'ombre».

<sup>23</sup> E. Zolla (1996), *La nube del telaio. Ragione e irrazionalità tra Oriente e Occidente*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Filosofia perenne e mente naturale*, Omnia, Marsilio, Venezia 2013, pp. 25-110, p. 53.

<sup>24</sup> E. Zolla, *Archetipi*, cit., p. 70.

In this sense, the multiplication *dispositif* is complementary to the polarisation one: whereas the latter is a microscopic research that helps to go deeper into a topic by investigating its peculiarities, the former provides the opportunity to look at the same subject from an ever-changing perspective. In this sense, the multiplication method may be called a “fluidifying tool for human thoughts”<sup>25</sup>.

Both the *dispositifs* that we have seen are supported by a specific hermeneutical attitude towards the subject of study. This attitude may be, first of all, summarised by the word “critique”, which, in this case, has to be understood in a broader way than before:

principio della critica è il gesto di gioia, di orrore, di reverenza che l’opera suscita. Stanno “criticando” la liturgia i fedeli che alzandosi, inginocchiandosi, congiungendo le mani manifestano la loro partecipazione [...] critica è rispondenza, antifona, cioè parte dell’opera stessa, sua prosecuzione, pertanto crescita del testo originario [...] l’oggettività consiste nel non tralignare dal gesto che il testo detta, e la soggettività sta nel non lasciarsi distrarre dai precetti sociali sul gesto giusto. Soggettivamente oggettivo e oggettivamente soggettivo sarà il critico giusto<sup>26</sup>.

“Critique” means in this case to be able to resonate with the theme that we are dealing with, to be interested in this subject to such a point to forget ourselves, our ideas, our preferences and our dislikes.

It means to go beyond subjectivity and objectivity, in order to really get in touch with our subject.

Another word that can be used as a synonym of “critique” is “intellect out of love”. The category of “intellect out of love” is used by Zolla in *I letterati e lo sciamano*<sup>27</sup> (1969), an anthropological work about the reception of Native Americans in American and European literature. In this context, first of all, Zolla shows that Native Americans have usually been seen by European colonizers with a biased approach: both when they were seen as the living evidence of the noble savage’s existence and when they were treated as primitive human beings, i. e. both from a benevolent and a malevolent point of view, there has rarely been someone who really tried to set up a dialog.

On the contrary, a researcher that is led by an “intellect out of love” is a researcher that tries to get rid of all his cognitive and emotional bias, in order to open a space of communication. This communication is characterized by love in the sense that the researcher has to really step aside, in order to welcome the other, may this other be similar or really different from him/her.

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<sup>25</sup> See, for an example of this *dispositif*, E. Zolla (1986), *L’amante invisibile. L’erotica sciamanica nelle religioni, nella letteratura e nella legittimazione politica*, a cura di G. Marchianò, *Omnia*, Marsilio, Venezia 2003.

<sup>26</sup> E. Zolla (1962), *Volgarità e dolore*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Il serpente di bronzo. Scritti antesignani di critica sociale*, *Omnia*, Marsilio, Venezia 2015, pp. 211-310, p. 310.

<sup>27</sup> E. Zolla (1969), *I letterati e lo sciamano*, a cura di G. Marchianò, *Omnia*, Marsilio, Venezia 2012. See, about the intellect out of love, also Culianu’s review of the English translation of the book: I. P. Culianu, *The construction of the Other*, in: *History of religions*, vol. 30, n. 3, 1991, pp. 308-311.

Zolla's method, with its dialectic of polarisation-multiplication led by an intellect out of love, i. e. led by a true desire of understanding the other, aims to find and to describe the "eternal shape" of the object analysed. This means that, for Zolla, it is more important to focus on a non-temporal description of reality, rather than to provide a genealogy of it. In this respect, it is relevant that in *I letterati e lo sciamano*, Zolla starts by saying that

questa storia [la storia delle tante immagini dell'Indiano] insegna infine che essa non è tanto una storia quanto una morfologia, se i giorni e le opere vi si connettono piuttosto secondo forme (quasi) permanenti che secondo i rigori della cronologia. La materia è rimutata e svariata dai tempi, ma le sue forme o entelechie persistono, eclissandosi spesso soltanto per riemergere<sup>28</sup>.

This means that even when he is dealing with an argument such as the *history* of the reception of the Native Americans in literature, it is more important to look at the underlying and transversal structure than at the history as such. What matters is neither chronology nor the events as such, but the ideal and material forces that led to some results. In Zolla's perspective, each and every problem, be it natural, socio-historical, psychological, has its own inner logic, that may be discovered by one, who is not only interested in the surface, but that tries to reach a deeper level of understanding.

Zolla's methodology, consisting of the polarisation-multiplication dialectic led by the intellect out of love and aimed at knowing the underlying structure, the inner shape of any subject of study, has, as its horizon, the overcoming of any ideological *aut-aut*, of any dogmatism, of any stereotypical belief. In one word: it has, as its horizon, syncretism<sup>29</sup>. In *Verità segrete esposte in evidenza* (1990), Zolla writes:

il sincretismo è la parificazione tra le religioni o tra le filosofie o anche tra filosofie e religioni. Infatti le distinzioni fra sistemi e fedi appaiono dovute a un punto di vista troppo ravvicinato: per ogni ente esiste un'angolazione dalla quale esso cessa di distinguersi da ciò che lo circonda e lo delimita<sup>30</sup>.

A syncretistic approach means, for Zolla, an approach at the same time interested in the differences and able to find identity. The opposite approach, the dogmatic one, on the contrary, has the tendency to remain attached to the differences, without even looking at the possibility of a further convergence. A syncretistic approach looks at its subjects from an aerial perspective, but this doesn't mean that it

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<sup>28</sup> E. Zolla, *I letterati e lo sciamano*, cit., pp. 23-24.

<sup>29</sup> On syncretism in Zolla's thought, see S. Crapiz, *Sincretismo*, in «Conoscenza religiosa nuova serie», num 1, 2012, pp. 51-62.

<sup>30</sup> E. Zolla, *Verità segrete esposte in evidenza*, cit., p. 351.

is more superficial than the other one. It only means that it places itself at the vanishing point, at that point where all the perspective lines gather together and become the point beyond the frame.

The described methodology can be therefore summarised in the word “syncretism”, provided that we understand the complexity of this word, in which is included the love for the subject analysed, love that wants to bring to light its true shape and therefore needs both polarisation and multiplication, as useful cognitive tools in the quest for that shape. It can be called a “soft method” in the sense that it doesn’t want to dictate some categories to an unknown reality, but tries to let this reality arise, lets the shape of reality stem from reality itself. In other words: it is a method that teaches how to get rid of every pre-designed method in order to let the method, i. e. the path, arise from the subject itself.

## b) A comprehensive look at Zolla’s works

If we look at Zolla’s intellectual production, we can be surprised by the extent of his interests, which range from Western to Eastern philosophy, from critical theory to mysticism<sup>31</sup>, from comparative literature to shamanism and alchemy. The difficulty in finding a distinctive field of study, in which the author could be classified, derives from his eclectic attitude: he can’t be seen as a philosopher, because, despite his interest in the critical theory developed by the Frankfurt School, his thought can’t be framed in any school and his language can be called philosophical only in a broad sense; he can’t be classified as an anthropologist or as a religious historian, because he is not really keen on history or culture as such, but in history and culture as ways of reaching a dimension beyond them; he can’t even be seen as a traditionalist or as an esotericist, if we mean by these words someone who reacts against modern world in the name of a single true tradition.

On the other side, he is at the same time a philosopher, an anthropologist, a religious historian and an esotericist, since his entire production links together at least these four different dimensions, in order to better understand reality.

In the end, the difficulty in classifying his thought seems to lie in our categories rather than in his production, since each and every category that tries to provide a classification turns out to be too tight and unable to offer a realistic image of this cross-disciplinary intellectual.

How can we therefore analyse his thought? Which perspective should we choose? Maybe, if it were possible to find a point in common among all the different interests, these interests too would appear more integrated with one another.

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<sup>31</sup> See A. Arsena, *Mistica*, in «Conoscenza religiosa nuova serie», num. 1, 2012, pp. 137-147.

Maybe, this point in common is something beyond the specific topics, maybe it has to do with an experience preceding, temporally and ontologically, every cultural interest. It is possible to find some indications in this sense, if we analyse what Zolla says in *Lo stupore infantile* (1994):

la prima certezza che mi fu chiara da bambino fu quella di non avere un'esistenza circoscritta, sicura e garantita, di non essere un io. I confini del sentire erano sempre sul punto di sprofondare e svanire<sup>32</sup>.

At the heart of Zolla's research we find a childhood experience of an "I" completely different from the adult one: an insubstantial "I", an "I" that is at the same time the world that surrounds it; a dreamlike "I", which can't be identified either with the subject or with the object, and which, at the same time, is both the subject and the object.

This experience is the core on which all the manifold interests of Zolla are grounded.

Starting from this experience, one may ask oneself three important questions: "who am I?", "what does it mean to be alive?", "what is reality?". The metaphysical questions are at the same time strictly related to the ethical ones: "why, for what purpose, do I live?" "how should I live?"<sup>33</sup>.

Both the term "metaphysics" and the term "ethics" are used by Zolla in an unusual way. On one side, metaphysics means the experience of reality as a whole and the ability to turn this experience into a discursive knowledge, which, inversely, is a true knowledge only if it provides the tools to live again that experience:

[la metafisica] ha senso nella misura in cui non sia una pura tecnica e non diventi un'avvocatesca difesa di certe formulazioni o addirittura di certi termini ma nasca dal piacere di enunciare in discorsi chiari e distinti i caratteri di una vita per la quale sia abituale l'abbandono, spontanea la trascendenza d'ogni fatto limitato e storico, costante, a dispetto di tutte le avversità, la disposizione alla lode gioiosa<sup>34</sup>.

On the other side, the term "ethics" means the way that helps the human being to become free: free from every mask imposed by society, free from every intrapsychic mechanism, free from any kind of automatism; free to become what one already is, free to get in touch with one's own nature-face.

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<sup>32</sup> E. Zolla (1994), *Lo stupore infantile*, cit., p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> See: E. Zolla, *Il giovane Lukàcs*, in «Tempo presente», num. 7, luglio 1958, pp. 591-592; E. Zolla, *Insolita allocuzione di un potente*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 4, ottobre-dicembre 1971, pp. 427-430, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, cit., pp. 159-162, p. 161. See also, in relation to the link between ethics and metaphysics: E. Zolla, *La mia prospettiva etica*, in «Ethica. Rassegna di filosofia morale», num. 2, 1965, pp. 111-121. See also E. Zolla (1971), *Che cos'è la tradizione*, Adelphi, Milano, 2011, pp. 105, 128-132. 170-174.

<sup>34</sup> E. Zolla, *Le potenze dell'anima*, cit., p. 25.

Ethics has therefore nothing to do with behaviour rules, but rather with an act of contemplation that frees from the need for a rule:

la contemplazione offre modo di uscire dai vincoli che il mondo circostante intreccia attorno ad un uomo ed è pertanto l'unica fonte di gioia spontanea e solo i contemplativi sono capaci di apportare libertà<sup>35</sup>.

Ethics and metaphysics are therefore strictly related, they are two faces of the same experience, which can be seen from the side of contemplation (metaphysics) and/or from the side of action (ethics): there cannot be any idea of freedom without a metaphysical background and, at the same time, there won't be any metaphysics, if it is not embodied in a specific way of life.

From the early years of Zolla's intellectual career to the last book published in 2002, we may find that this ethical-metaphysical attitude is always present.

During his university years, this attitude leads him to study, besides law, also psychiatry<sup>36</sup>. These two academic disciplines help him to focus on the problem of subjectivity both from a juridical and from a medical perspective. Thanks to the experience in a mental institution and to the resulting reflections upon the problem of an "I" that is always in danger of fading away, thanks to the contemporary exploration of the concept of "persona" in the legislation, he comes to the conclusion that the ideas of "I" and "person" are human constructions: they are a social fiction<sup>37</sup>.

Anyway, it is the interest for philosophy that helps Zolla to better develop his intuition about the fictitious character of the notions of "I" and "person". In 1947, he writes *Saggi di etica e di estetica*<sup>38</sup>, where it is analysed Croce's ethical and esthetical thought. In this contest, he finds that both from an idealistic perspective and from an empiricist one, the notions of "I" and "person" result as illusions<sup>39</sup>. In the fifties, Zolla turns to literature and writes many papers on English, American, German, French and Russian writers. He writes especially about H. Melville, J. Joyce, A. Gide, T. Mann, F. Kafka, B. Pasternak and many others<sup>40</sup>. The intertwining of the literary critic and of the philosophical analysis,

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<sup>35</sup> E. Zolla, *La mia prospettiva etica*, cit., p. 119.

<sup>36</sup> See G. Marchianò, *Il conoscitore di segreti*, cit., pp. 39-47.

<sup>37</sup> Ivi, pp. 47-48. See E. Zolla, *The word "person"*, in «The Times Literary Supplement», 23 ottobre 1948.

<sup>38</sup> E. Zolla, *Saggi di etica e di estetica*, Spaziani, Torino 1947.

<sup>39</sup> Ivi, pp. 37-44.

<sup>40</sup> See for example: E. Zolla, *Franz Kafka*, in «Letterature moderne», num. 4, dicembre 1950, pp. 495-507; E. Zolla, *I miti di André Gide*, in «Il pensiero critico», num. 4, luglio-settembre 1951, pp. 305-320; E. Zolla, *James Joyce e la moderna Apocalisse*, in «Il pensiero critico», num. 6, novembre 1952, pp. 1-12, article republished in: G. Marchianò, *Il conoscitore di segreti. Una biografia intellettuale*, Marsilio, Venezia 2012, pp. 188-198; E. Zolla, *Thomas Mann*, in «Letterature

which continues in the direction of the Frankfurt School, gives Zolla the opportunity to have a deeper and broader view on the problem of subjectivity<sup>41</sup>. The discovery of Simone Weil<sup>42</sup> on one side and of psychoanalysis<sup>43</sup> on the other helps him to find a link between philosophy, mysticism and psychology, a link that will be extremely fruitful.

The various ideas coming from literature, critical philosophy, psychology, law, mystical philosophy, find an expression in two essays published between the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties: *Eclissi dell'intellettuale*<sup>44</sup> (1959) and *Volgarità e dolore*<sup>45</sup> (1962). These two books are

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moderne», num. 2, marzo-aprile 1953, pp. 146-153; E. Zolla, *Il linguaggio di Pierre*, in «Studi Americani», num. 3, 1957, pp. 63-97; E. Zolla, *Cinque tesi sul Dottor Živago*, in «Tempo presente», num. 2, febbraio 1958, pp. 135-139, article republished in: G. Marchianò, *Il conoscitore di segreti. Una biografia intellettuale*, Marsilio, Venezia 2012, pp. 199-206; E. Zolla, *Il passaggio di Pasternak dall'avanguardia alla tradizione*, in «L'approdo letterario», num. 4, ottobre-dicembre 1958, pp. 59-68; E. Zolla, *Djuna Barnes*, in «Studi Americani», num. 5, 1959, pp. 301-313; E. Zolla, *Proust e la politica di potenza*, in «Nuovi argomenti», num. 49-50, marzo-giugno 1961, pp. 105-116; E. Zolla, *L'etica puritana di Emily Dickinson*, in «Studi Americani», num. 8, 1962, pp. 55-70; E. Zolla, *La struttura e le fonti di Clarel*, in «Studi Americani», num. 10, 1964, pp. 101-134; E. Zolla, *Septimius Felton e la letteratura alchemica inglese e americana*, in «Rivista di Estetica», num. 1, 1967, pp. 17-55; E. Zolla, *John Ronald Reuel Tolkien e Beowulf*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 3, luglio-settembre 1969, pp. 306-343, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, cit., pp. 335-372. See, also, regarding American transcendentalism: E. Zolla (1963), *Le origini del trascendentalismo*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 2010; E. Zolla, *The relation of nature and language in Transcendentalism*, in: T. A. Riese (a cura di), *Vistas of a continent*, Winter Verlag, Heidelberg, 1979, pp. 143-168. For a better understanding of Zolla's contribution to the American studies, see: F. Giordano, *Elémire Zolla, americanista*, in: M. Bagigalupo, G. Dowling (a cura di), *Ambassadors. American studies in a changing world. Proceedings of the XVII international AISNA conference (Roma, Centro Studi Americani, 6-8 Novembre 2003)*, Azienda Grafica Busco Edizioni, Rapallo 2006, pp. 98-110; A. Palumbo, *Americanistica*, in «Conoscenza religiosa nuova serie», num. 1, 2012, pp. 25-38.

<sup>41</sup> See E. Zolla, *Considerazioni inattuali*, in: V. Boarini (a cura di), *Erotismo, eversione, merce*, Cappelli, Bologna 1974, nuova edizione: F. Francione (a cura di), *Erotismo, eversione, merce*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine, 2019, pp. 171-179, p. 171. It results, from this publication, dating back to 1973, that Zolla knew the dialectic of Enlightenment since 1950. See, for the interest for a sociological perspective, which however is considered insufficient to understand modern society, E. Zolla, *The end and the means*, in: R. Rosenthal (ed.), *Mc Luhan pro and con*, Funk & Wagnalls, New York 1968, pp. 178-185. In this article, Zolla analyses Mc Luhan perspective (see, about the relation between Zolla's and Mc Luhan perspectives: P. Granata, *Dal cliché all'archetipo: McLuhan scopre Zolla*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Labirinti della mente, visioni del mondo. Il lascito intellettuale di Elémire Zolla nel XXI secolo*, Società bibliografica toscana, Sinalunga 2012, pp. 131-144).

<sup>42</sup> See E. Zolla, *Simone Weil*, cit.

<sup>43</sup> See E. Zolla (a cura di), *La psicanalisi*, Garzanti, Milano 1960.

<sup>44</sup> E. Zolla, *Eclissi dell'intellettuale*, cit.

<sup>45</sup> E. Zolla, *Volgarità e dolore*, cit.

important especially because they bring to the attention of the Italian public the theses developed by Adorno and Horkheimer. In both these books, we find a harsh criticism of modern society, whose main character is the lack of vitality, the massification that turns every human being into an automaton, neither alive nor dead, just operative.

In the attempt to describe modern society, Zolla finds an ally in H. Melville, who helps him to understand the importance of not being identified with anything, in order to better understand everything. The so called moralistic approach is, in Zolla's terms, an approach that, by not making any compromise, by distinguishing good from evil, by polarizing reality, contributes to put every reality into perspective and not to be affected by it. This approach is especially necessary while dealing with an argument that is likely to engage the researcher himself: if the researcher doesn't take a step back, it will be difficult to be accurate and impartial. Anyway, "to be objective" doesn't mean that one has to deal with that topic as if it weren't important. On the contrary, it means to look at it with a sort of attention which is subjective-objective; an attention which is at the same time partaker of the topic in question and able to look at it as it is, with transparency and passion at the same time. In Zolla's words, the moralist is

colui che crea dal nulla, o meglio dall'apparenza innocente trae la mitologia del conflitto tra il Bene e il Male, fra schiere angeliche e diaboliche, scorge battaglie fra quei ranghi (e patteggiamenti). Grazie a codesta proiezione sullo sfondo d'una lotta oltretterrena il moralista giudica, mette distanza tra sé e gli altri, il suo gesto è appunto allontanante, il suo tono gelido o appassionato, mai complice<sup>46</sup>.

This approach is especially necessary, when one is dealing with a topic, such as modern society, in which one lives, in which one breaths, which is the horizon of the every-day life. Both becoming accustomed to an unacceptable condition of alienation and longing for a change should be avoided by a researcher that wants to understand, instead of just condemning or commending; the only solution, when the topic itself causes pain in the researcher, is to analyse it from every possible perspective, in order to understand it and maybe, thanks to this understanding, to change it:

infatti la chiarezza del pensiero è terapeutica di per sé perché evita che al male irrimediabile s'aggiungano cecità e incoscienza [...] le misure che si prenderanno grazie alla coscienza nitida d'una situazione dovranno scaturire dal talento a trovare risorse pratiche, che sono il corrispettivo dell'ispirazione poetica o dell'intuito speculativo: dalla spontaneità imprevedibile che soccorre chi sappia abbandonarsi al vero<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> E. Zolla, *Il moralismo*, in E. Zolla, A. Moravia (a cura di), *I moralisti moderni*, Garzanti, Milano 1960, pp. 13-14.

<sup>47</sup> See E. Zolla, *Il nuovo oscurantismo*, in «La Nazione», 12 maggio 1961, article republished by G. Marchianò with the title *L'assalto dei luoghi comuni* in: E. Zolla, *Gli arcani del potere*, cit., pp. 92-95, pp. 94-95. See also E. Zolla, *Volgarità*

Critique of modern society is the first step, the first therapy that may help to become aware of the context in which one is living; it is the precondition for an opening up to another life-form.

Especially in relation to the analysis of the modern world, Zolla finds that sorrow may become a hermeneutical tool. It may provide a different kind of sensitivity, a higher one, a way of going beyond violence:

si impara, nelle parole di Simone Weil che “il falso Dio trasforma la sofferenza in violenza, il vero Dio trasforma la violenza in sofferenza”; se si soffre invece di irritarsi e bestemmiare, se si riconosce nella sofferenza una modificazione ed un modo di conoscenza, si diventa invulnerabili, cioè già morti e nella vita eterna<sup>48</sup>.

A gaze full of sorrow, a gaze that is able to deal with this pain without becoming violent, without giving in to the society's logic, is a gaze that may undermine the logic of violence itself. In this respect, it is particularly relevant that Zolla deals with sadism and mysticism almost at the same time. In 1961, he publishes an anthology of Sade's writings, where he analyses Sade's philosophy as the direct consequence of the enlightened idea of reason<sup>49</sup>; on the other side, in 1963, he publishes the anthology *I Mistici*<sup>50</sup>, which can be understood as the introduction of a different paradigm, a paradigm that arises exactly then, when violence is all-pervading.

On one side, the anthology *I mistici* is a direct answer to the anthology on Sade; on the other side, however, it also marks a point of no return in Zolla's works: sorrow may not be the last word, critique may not be the only solution: a critique marked by sorrow is certainly the way that contributes to understand reality, but it seems not to provide a positive solution.

Therefore, if deconstruction is already construction, in this case it means that the deconstruction of modernity brings out another possibility: by denying modernity, Zolla affirms what modernity denies, i. e. a dimension of subjectivity that exceeds finitude. The study of mysticism helps Zolla to find the positive meaning of critique, a meaning that can in the first place be summarized by the notion of quietness: «Il centro della vita è la quiete, il cuore vuoto»<sup>51</sup>. To be quiet means to be able to put one's

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*e dolore*, cit., pp. 240-241: «il pensiero non deve fornire ricette, deve capire. Il fatto che una cosa non sia evitabile non significa che non sia criticabile. Capire non è accettare. Ma, dicono gli smarriti, come agire? Vedendo nella giusta prospettiva i fatti, l'azione scaturirà da sola; l'ispirazione pratica sarà data (o non data) per soprammercato».

<sup>48</sup> Ivi, p. 71.

<sup>49</sup> D. de Sade, *Le opere*, cit.

<sup>50</sup> E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell'Occidente*, cit.

<sup>51</sup> E. Zolla, *Adorno tra metacritica e metafisica*, cit., p. 48.

“I” and “person” aside, in order to become a mere witness, in order to become free of “like” and “dislike” and therefore more open for a different kind of knowledge:

come si ottiene la quiete? Una risposta semplicissima dice: diventando testimoni di se stessi, osservando la propria psiche, facendo un passo indietro<sup>52</sup>.

When the subject is still, when there is no “I”, the logic of violence is deactivated, since there is no more “mine” and “yours”, no more self-reflection, no more distinction between body and soul, between me and the other: Sade is defeated not by a repression of some instinct, but by the overcoming of any need that doesn’t fit with quietness itself.

On one side, mysticism shows that a healthy subject is someone who has found peace and stillness in oneself, someone who is out of the “logic of having”, someone who is no more split between an I that one has and a Non-I that may be in one’s possession; on the other side, it shows that this kind of subjectivity is a precondition for a broader kind of knowledge, a supra-rational intuition that is only possible when interiority has become so empty that there is room for the experience of the infinite:

il mistico si pone oltre la conoscenza meramente discorsiva, ma non nel senso moderno di una diffamazione dell’intelletto a favore di una intuizione che coincida con il senso comune e lo stereotipo sentimentale. L’irrazionalità moderna significa soltanto che si perseguita il principio critico e perciò l’ordine logico del discorso intellettuale. La sovrarrazionalità mistica e il suo sacrificio dell’intelletto è invece un invito a non pietrificarsi nelle determinazioni del discorso come se queste esaurissero la realtà, è un porsi dalla parte del mistero senza il quale l’intelletto non avrebbe vita, e che è la fonte dell’intelletto<sup>53</sup>.

The anthology on mysticism is also important from a bio-bibliographical perspective: from 1963 onwards, the harsh criticism of the author turns slowly into a different attitude. In 1964, Zolla publishes *Storia del fantasticare*<sup>54</sup>, a study on fancy and imagination, that describes one of the most important elements in the modern oblivion of mysticism. The identification of fancy and imagination, the inability to distinguish a day-dream from an active imagination, leads to the submission to fancies. These fancies, which are the main cause of a doubled self-consciousness, anchor the subject to his/her own dream and prevent him/her from any possibility of having a wider perspective, a wider notion of reality itself. On the contrary, the distinction between a subjective fancy and an objective imagination,

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<sup>52</sup> E. Zolla, *Che cos’è la tradizione*, cit., p. 319.

<sup>53</sup> E. Zolla, *Introduzione*, in: E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell’Occidente*, vol. 1, cit., p. 73.

<sup>54</sup> E. Zolla (1964), *Storia del fantasticare*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Il serpente di bronzo. Scritti antesignani di critica sociale*, Omnia, Marsilio, Venezia 2015, pp. 315-532.

an imagination that precedes and surrounds the subject, is of central importance for a different idea of subjectivity. In Zolla's opinion, only by purifying our imagination, it becomes possible to experience the mystical experience, i. e. the experience of the absolute as the coincidence of the opposites<sup>55</sup>. *Le potenze dell'anima*<sup>56</sup>, published in 1968, develops the problem of subjectivity and provides a cross-cultural overview of the most relevant representations of the soul. Whereas in *Storia del fantasticare* Zolla described the oblivion and misunderstanding of imagination, in this text he focuses on the second oblivion-misunderstanding: the oblivion of intellectual intuition. By comparing different notions of subjectivity, he comes to the conclusion that, in every culture, it can be found a reference to a spiritual, i. e. impersonal, dimension. This dimension can be known through a super-rational faculty, which is not irrational, but the basis of rationality itself. In this text, it is called the spiritual or intellectual dimension.

In 1971, with *Che cos'è la tradizione*<sup>57</sup>, Zolla summarizes his intellectual achievements and starts to move on to another stage of his life. The main claim of this book, a claim that originates from the anthology of 1963 and is developed from 1963 to 1971, is that there can only be one Tradition. Every different tradition is therefore an attempt to describe the one Tradition: it is its culturally determined manifestation. The common ground that unifies spatial, temporal and cultural differences is «l'uguale idea dell'uomo come essere che si completa soltanto, di là dal proprio corpo e dalla propria psiche, nell'intelletto attivo, nella beatitudine»<sup>58</sup>. Tradition has not much to do with the past, it is not necessarily the tradition of our ancestors, since its center is «a principle transcending time, whether or not it can prove its antiquity»<sup>59</sup>. The article published in English in 1991, recalling the main achievements of *Che cos'è la tradizione*, states that the traditional aim, the aim of every Tradition is

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<sup>55</sup> See also E. Zolla, *Le potenze dell'anima*, cit., p. 189.

<sup>56</sup> E. Zolla, *Le potenze dell'anima*, cit.

<sup>57</sup> E. Zolla, *Che cos'è la tradizione*, cit. See, regarding Zolla's idea of tradition: G. Marchianò, *Tradizione*, in «Conoscenza religiosa nuova serie», num. 1, 2012, pp. 9-15; L. Giuliadori., *Esperienze metafisiche esposte in evidenza: Elémire Zolla e la tradizione*, in: I. Pozzoni (a cura di), *Frammenti di filosofia contemporanea*, Limina mentis, Milano 2013, pp. 329-349; on the relationship between Zolla's idea of tradition and the hermeneutical one, see A. L. Funes Maderey, *Understanding tradition(s): Hans-Georg Gadamer and Elémire Zolla's Hermeneutics of the spirit*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Labirinti della mente, visioni del mondo. Il lascito intellettuale di Elémire Zolla nel XXI secolo*, Società bibliografica toscana, Sinalunga 2012, pp. 87-96.

<sup>58</sup> E. Zolla, *Che cos'è la tradizione*, cit., 179.

<sup>59</sup> E. Zolla, *The meaning of Tradition*, in: F. Ranjit (ed.), *The unanimous tradition: essays on the essential union of all religions*, Sri Lanka Institut of Cultural Studies, Colombo 1991, pp. 147-154, p. 147.

to help man to transcend his bodily, his psychic and his merely rational life, going beyond his sensations, his feelings and his reasonings, in order to attain by an intellectual intuition the idea and the presence of the absolute Being in his absolute perfection, which is the cause of all' beings<sup>60</sup>.

The capital T of "Tradition" is intended to underly the object of that Tradition, which is «the highest conceivable being»<sup>61</sup>. This being has to be known and experienced by the intellectual intuition, i. e. by a direct kind of knowledge which becomes one with the object known.

Therefore, it is clear that the one Tradition is not a particular tradition; it is not the Christian, the Greek, the Jewish, the Islamic, the Buddhist or the Hindu Tradition, but the common and non-temporal ground from which all the historical traditions stem. The Tradition links together the theoretical and the ethical level, since it provides the symbolical, mythical, ritual and theoretical tools, that may enable the subject to reach at the same time beatitude and truth, i. e. liberation<sup>62</sup> and identification between subject and object.

The truthfulness of the Tradition can't be logically proved, it has to be experienced: from the standpoint of reason, it can only be a premise, but from the perspective of the spirit<sup>63</sup>, it is the *conditio sine qua non* of any idea of humanity. Every single tradition provides the means for this experience. The means are often similar, but even when they are completely different, this doesn't mean that one is better than another, but that one tool may be useful in one context and another in another one.

The idea of Tradition is at the basis of the publication of a Journal, *Conoscenza religiosa* (1969-1983), which collects relevant articles of authors such as M. Schneider, H. Corbin, J. A. Heschel. The introduction of the first publication explains the main aim of the journal:

forse si è spiegato perché sarebbe buffo dire che questa rivista è dedicata all'etnologia, anche se pubblicherà testi etnologici; che è dedicata alla teologia, visto che non avrà motivo di pubblicare pagine teologiche che siano disgiunte dall'esperienza del divino e rispondano al puro e degno bisogno di ordine razionale entro un sistema; dire che è dedicata all'ecumenismo, essendo i suoi fini distinti da un'amabile amministrazione dei rapporti di buon vicinato tra le confessioni<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>62</sup> See, for a definition of liberation, E. Zolla, *Archetipi*, cit., p. 42: «liberazione è lasciar cadere il pupazzo che ci guida, spezzare l'identificazione con la nostra biografia».

<sup>63</sup> A really short but effective definition of "spirit" may be found in E. Zolla, *Archetipi*, cit., p. 179: «puro spirito, la capacità di osservazione testimoniale limpida e ferma».

<sup>64</sup> E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 1, gennaio-marzo 1969, pp. 1-3, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, cit., pp. 3-5, p. 5.

The term “religious” of the title *Conoscenza religiosa* doesn’t mean that the journal embraces a particular religion, but that every intellectual research published has to be linked to a knowledge that involves the subject as a whole. The main aim of the journal is to provide a different perspective on arguments that are usually discussed only by an historical or by a sectarian point of view; on the contrary, the journal wants to give voice to a kind of knowledge that, without becoming sectarian, is connected with life. Therefore, it aims to provide, as G. Marchianò says, an «apertura a una dimensione e a un’esperienza del sacro che si pone al di là delle barriere tra i singoli credo»<sup>65</sup>.

In Zolla’s opinion “to be religious” doesn’t mean neither to profess a faith nor to belong to a community; on the contrary, it means to be brave enough to die and rebirth as a new subject, to put aside every prejudice, every idea, in order to get in touch with the truth:

religioso in senso proprio s’intende chi ha subito la morte e ha avuto il dono della rinascita, chi è risuscitato da visioni e patimenti infernali.<sup>66</sup>

Between 1969 and 1986, Zolla tries to better define the concept of Tradition by dealing with some of its different aspects.

In the book of 1975, *Le meraviglie della natura*<sup>67</sup>, he analyses the ideas of alchemy; the book makes it plain that Western alchemy can be seen as the best theoretical and practical example of a conception of reality that blends together subjectivity and objectivity.

In 1978, he writes a new book on imagination, *The uses of imagination and the decline of the West*<sup>68</sup>. Whereas the book of 1964 was focused on the dark side of imagination, i. e. fancy, in this essay he develops the analysis of true imagination: the cosmic imagination or *mundus imaginalis*. The history of the notion of *mundus imaginalis* seems to be able to link the neoplatonic tradition with Eastern philosophies and especially with the Vedantic one.

In 1981, *Archetypes*<sup>69</sup> is published in London. It is an analysis of the concept of “archetype” that starts from the mystical experience of the Absolute. The mystical experience, which, in this book, is called “metaphysical experience”, is seen as the ontological, gnoseological and experiential precondition,

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<sup>65</sup> G. Marchianò, *Il conoscitore di segreti*, cit., p. 85.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>67</sup> E. Zolla (1975), *Le meraviglie della natura*, a cura di G. Marchianò, *Omnia*, Marsilio, Venezia 2017.

<sup>68</sup> E. Zolla (1978), *The uses of imagination and the decline of the West*, Airez, Montepulciano, 2010.

<sup>69</sup> E. Zolla, *Archetipi*, cit. Zolla translates the book in Italian in 1988. A first paper about the archetypes was published in 1979: E. Zolla, *Archetypes*, in «The American Scholar», num. 2, spring 1979, pp. 191-207. See, for a discussion about the concept of archetyp in Zolla, C. Dalmeri, *Archetipo*, in «Conoscenza religiosa nuova serie», num. 1, 2012, pp.149-158.

that allows to understand the category of “archetype”. The archetypes are considered by Zolla at the same time as the structure of reality and as its living side. Since they are structural, they also are the gnoseological premise of every understanding of reality: they are categories or ideas. But, just as the ideas in the platonic tradition, they also are forces, they are nature itself before becoming confined in matter, they are the living matter, or, better, the vital principle of matter itself. On the basis of the metaphysical experience, it is possible to consider what we call reality as a shadow of the archetypal world, which is, for itself, a shadow of the metaphysical experience, of the experience of the Absolute. In *The Androgyne: fusion of the sexes*<sup>70</sup> (1982) and in *L'amante invisibile. L'erotica sciamanica nelle religioni, nella letteratura e nella legittimazione politica*<sup>71</sup> (1986), Zolla explores the two archetypes of the androgyne and of the invisible divine lover. Between *Archetypes* and these other two essays, in 1982, Zolla writes the encyclopaedia article about symbolism, where we can find the framework that links together all the different arguments he is interested in:

la simbologia del Novecento, in quanto distinta dalla semiotica, considera il simbolo quale modo di conoscenza non discorsivo che ha per oggetto ideale la realtà metafisica. Si dice conoscenza 'non discorsiva', cioè distinta dall'organizzazione dei segni linguistici (anche se questi possono essere usati per indicare un simbolo o trasformarsi in simboli quando siano assunti nella sfera del rito o della poesia) e si aggiunge: eccedente rispetto a ogni enunciazione discorsiva [...]. Il secondo carattere del simbolo si esprime nel fatto che, mentre le varie realtà sensibili possono essere simboli l'una dell'altra (il leone può simboleggiare il sole e viceversa), esse rinviano tutte alle realtà non sensibili, le quali sono l'oggetto simboleggiato per eccellenza: simboleggiabile e non simboleggiante. Queste realtà metafisiche non sensibili sono le forme formanti rispetto alle cose sensibili e transitorie (e il celebre detto di Goethe insegna che ogni cosa transitoria è solo un simbolo), cioè alle forme formate [...] le forme formanti rinviano a loro volta a una causa ulteriore, il principio ontologico, che è l'oggetto ultimo di ogni simbologia<sup>72</sup>.

This article is really relevant, since it provides, in few words, the idea that underlines Zolla's entire production: true reality can be known only by a metaphysical experience that exceeds the distinction between subject and object; this experience can't be properly defined or described because it comes before language itself. The most likely description may be that one that considers the metaphysical experience as the experience of the All-One; the first departure from this “unity-in-totality” is the archetypal world, which is the world between physical reality and the Absolute. Physical reality is

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<sup>70</sup> E. Zolla (1982), *Incontro con l'androgino. L'esperienza della completezza sessuale*, a cura di A. Sabbadini, Red, Como 1995 (1989).

<sup>71</sup> E. Zolla, *L'amante invisibile*, cit. see also E. Zolla, *The archetype of the supernatural lady from ancient Arabia to Edwardian England*, in «Incognita», 1, 2, 1990, pp. 183-208.

<sup>72</sup> E. Zolla, *Simbologia*, in «Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani», Vol. VI, 1982, pp. 539-550 [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/simbologia\\_%28Enciclopedia-del-Novecento%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/simbologia_%28Enciclopedia-del-Novecento%29/), paragraph 1.

the realization of the archetypes, but, by realizing them as something finite, it also “betrays” the archetypal world. Symbolism is a way of understanding reality as the interrelation of these different dimensions; it is also the way through which it is possible to switch from a reality to another.

Since being sensible to the symbolic character of every reality means to be able to get in touch with our “objective imagination”, it should become more clear in which sense Zolla states that a healthy imagination is the precondition for knowledge. This quote helps us also to understand why Zolla analyses so many different cultures, why he is not satisfied with any definition or description of reality. Every word, every book, every culture, every single topic is not important for itself, but because it may provide some inputs to overcome the finite dimension:

la verità si lascia accostare soprattutto da una ditirambica ebbrezza linguistica, in cui sinonimi e similitudini sgorgano con un incalzare incontenibile e il ritmo a spirale spinge innanzi il flusso di invenzioni metaforiche, finché una forza ignota, trascendente, glossolalica assume la direzione del discorso: allora, come l'estro aumenta, vorticosamente si restringe la distanza fra lo scintillio verbale e la realtà denotata<sup>73</sup>.

The dialogue with different cultures, the desire to really understand the other, in order to enrich one's worldview is at the center of *Aure*<sup>74</sup>, published in 1985. In this essay, Zolla tries to evoke some atmospheres, that may contribute to get in touch with the meaning of symbolism. In Zolla's opinion, these atmospheres are not any more available in Western countries, but a lucky researcher may find them abroad, in India, Iran, Bali, Corea, Japan. This book is, therefore, at the same time an essay and a travel journal, where Zolla describes his travels eastwards, in search of auras. An aura is, so to say, the beauty that stems from the connection between the material world and the archetypal one; it is like a gate that enables the subject to look at reality from a new-old perspective, from the perspective of a child, i. e.: with astonishment. The experience of an aura is the inner meaning of every symbolism, of every rite and myth; the experience of the origin beyond time and space, that here and now reveals itself, is the experience of an aura, the premise for a symbolic and mystical life.

In 1986, Zolla writes a small essay on syncretism, *Il sincretismo*<sup>75</sup>, where the idea of the one Tradition is inserted in the Renaissance period; in philosophers such as Pico della Mirandola or Giordano

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<sup>73</sup> E. Zolla, *Archetipi*, cit., p. 70.

<sup>74</sup> E. Zolla, *Aure*, cit.

<sup>75</sup> E. Zolla, *Il sincretismo*, Guida, Napoli 1986. In 1983 he had already written an article called “Il sincretismo” in *Conoscenza religiosa* (. Zolla, *Il sincretismo*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 4, ottobre-dicembre 1983, pp. 381-395, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, a cura di G. Marchianò, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, pp. 751-765). This essay, written in 1986, is an elaboration of that work.

Bruno, Zolla finds a Western attempt to overcome the differences among philosophies and between philosophy and religion.

The nineties bring together all of Zolla's intellectual experience. In this time, Zolla is less and less interested in a critique of Western society and in a moralistic standpoint, while he is more and more keen on a true metaphysical point of view. A true metaphysical point of view can be described as one that goes beyond good and evil, that deconstructs every kind of distinction, that is not any more interested in any kind of hierarchy. From this standpoint, even the distinction between archetypal and material world is clearly just a rhetorical, a moralistic, device, not something real. The only reality is the pure, naked presence, the natural mind that doesn't try to classify or to understand anything; this mind *is*, and nothing more; no words are needed, no metaphysical constructions, no critique of anything; just the experience of non-duality.

In these years he links together Eastern and Western philosophies and tries to describe this non-dual condition from both perspectives.

In 1990, *Verità segrete esposte in evidenza*<sup>76</sup> collects and revises in the new context of this book some previous writings, such as *Il sincretismo* and *The uses of imagination and the decline of the West*. In 1992, Zolla publishes *Uscite dal mondo*<sup>77</sup>, which recalls the possibility of escaping from Western civilization and travelling in time or space to find new and unknown worlds. In 1994, *Lo stupore infantile*<sup>78</sup> is aimed at awakening the ability to wonder. *Le tre vie*<sup>79</sup>, 1995, examines three different Hindu paths of knowledge that lead to liberation, i. e., to a non-dual knowledge. In 1996, *La nube del telaio*<sup>80</sup> puts into question the Western idea of "reason" and analyses the different meanings of this word in different cultures. *La filosofia perenne*<sup>81</sup> (1999) develops the idea of Tradition-syncretism by resuming the Renaissance concept of "perennis philosophia" and by extending it to include Eastern philosophies. The last essays, published after his death in 2002 with the title *Discesa all'Ade e resurrezione*<sup>82</sup>, are about the relation between the symbolic death and the rebirth as a new kind of

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<sup>76</sup> E. Zolla, *Verità segrete esposte in evidenza*, cit.

<sup>77</sup> E. Zolla (1992), *Uscite dal mondo*, a cura di G. Marchianò, *Omnia*, Marsilio, Venezia 2012.

<sup>78</sup> E. Zolla, *Lo stupore infantile*, cit.

<sup>79</sup> E. Zolla, *Le tre vie*, cit.

<sup>80</sup> E. Zolla (1996), *La nube del telaio. Ragione e irrazionalità tra Oriente e Occidente*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Filosofia perenne e mente naturale*, *Omnia*, Marsilio, Venezia 2013, pp. 25-110.

<sup>81</sup> E. Zolla, *La filosofia perenne*, cit.

<sup>82</sup> E. Zolla (2002), *Discesa all'Ade e resurrezione*, Nota al testo di G. Marchianò, Adelphi, Milano 2013.

human being. In this regard, one quote might be helpful in understanding this last book and Zolla's entire production:

sano sarebbe chi ha eliminato la persona. Sarebbe salutare amputarsi metaforicamente la testa, ritenersi corpo senza identità, in uscita ovvero in estasi. Si cessi di identificarsi col soggetto che regge all'oggettività del mondo: si rimane impeccabilmente liberi, navigando tra foreste fittissime e mari sterminati, scivolando fra venti e nubi, diventiamo noi la natura vivida che ci scorre accanto [...] siamo acefali: estinti e però anche rinati al mondo. Stronchiamo il chiacchierio mentale, eliminiamo il fantasticare, accogliamo cielo, terra e mare, cessiamo di rammentare, non ce facciamo più niente dei nostri ricordi: *perdiamo la testa*. Questo ci dà un contraccolpo di vitalità nuovissima, si fluisce nei boschi, si plana nell'aria, sospesi nel vuoto<sup>83</sup>.

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<sup>83</sup> Ivi, p. 60.

### c) Sources

Since it is impossible, in this work, to analyse all of Zolla's sources<sup>84</sup>, but at the same time it is important to provide a cultural and historical context, we may identify six main traditions that affect his thought: moralism, Platonism, mysticism, alchemy, shamanism, Eastern philosophy. These six groups of sources may be grouped in two macro-categories: moralism and mysticism. Platonism, mysticism, alchemy, shamanism and Eastern philosophy provide different starting points in order to analyse the spiritual dimension, i. e. the impersonal dimension of a mystical subjectivity, whereas moralism helps Zolla define modern society and modern subjectivity.

Who is a moralist? In an anthology edited with Zolla, Moravia writes:

moralisti moderni. La parola moralisti evoca tutto un mondo scomparso: i moralisti greci e romani, i moralisti cristiani, i moralisti francesi e inglesi. Perché scomparso? Perché non può esserci moralismo senza un'idea dell'uomo ossia senza un umanesimo purchessia<sup>85</sup>.

A moralist is, in the first place, someone who is able to examine the human condition because he has an idea of humanity, because he is a humanist: someone who wants to know, in order to become more human.

Zolla's moralistic sources can be found especially in some novelists like Melville<sup>86</sup>, Mann<sup>87</sup>, Kafka, Musil<sup>88</sup>, in some philosophers such as Weil, Croce<sup>89</sup>, Adorno, but also in Freudian psychoanalysis<sup>90</sup>. The moralistic approach wants to destroy «ogni forma pietrificata e data, e “badare a ciò cui non si bada”»<sup>91</sup>. This means that moralism is a specific way of paying attention to something we usually don't pay attention to. In an optimistic society, in a society that doesn't even see the need for the

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<sup>84</sup> It is impossible because the range of authors quoted is so vast that analysing one by one Zolla's sources would mean to analyse most of the European, American and Eastern intellectual production.

<sup>85</sup> A. Moravia, E. Zolla (a cura di), *I moralisti moderni*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>86</sup> See: E. Zolla, *Melville e l'abbandono dello zodiaco*, in «Paragone», num. 128, agosto 1960, pp. 3-41, brano in parte antologizzato in: G. Marchianò, *Il conoscitore di segreti. Una biografia intellettuale*, Marsilio, Venezia 2012, pp. 367-383; E. Zolla, *Melville dinanzi al Risorgimento ed alla guerra di secessione*, in *Italia e Stati Uniti nell'età del Risorgimento e della guerra civile. Atti del II Symposium di Studi Americani. Firenze 27-29 maggio 1966*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1969, pp. 7-18; E. Zolla, *Prefazione*, in: H. Melville, *Clarel*, Adelphi, Milano 1993 (1965), pp. 11-68;

<sup>87</sup> See E. Zolla, *Thomas Mann*, in «Letterature moderne», num. 2, marzo-aprile 1953, pp. 146-153.

<sup>88</sup> See E. Zolla, *L'uomo negativo*, in «Tempo presente», num. 2, febbraio 1957, pp. 157-158.

<sup>89</sup> See E. Zolla, *Saggi di etica e di estetica*, cit.

<sup>90</sup> See for instance S. Freud, *La psicanalisi*, anthologized in 1960 in: E. Zolla (a cura di), *La psicanalisi*, cit., pp. 5-29.

<sup>91</sup> E. Zolla, *Il moralismo*, in: A. Moravia, E. Zolla (a cura di), *I moralisti moderni*, cit. *Il moralismo*, cit., p. 14, p. 26.

question about “meaning”<sup>92</sup>, in a society that is not interested in understanding what is good and what is evil, in a society that, by saying that everything is good or evil depending on the standpoint, denies the distinction itself, the moralist must be pessimistic, the moralist must be dualistic: he/she needs to look into the evil, to go beyond the surface of indistinctness, to overcome the indifference, in order to unveil again the distinction. In other words, in a society where there is no sign of goodness, where everything is flattened, only by recognizing the evil and by denying it, the good may arise. The moralist is therefore someone who tries to awake society from the sleep of indifference by stressing this distinction.

Without the moralistic approach, everything would seem to be at the same time good and evil, there would not be a standpoint outside of the relativity of points of view, and these points of view would appear as relative terms of a mathematical function:

lo spirito disfa, scompiglia e ristabilisce in un nuovo rapporto. Il bene e il male, il sopra e il sotto non sono per lui concetti scetticamente relativi, ma membri di una funzione, valori che dipendono dalla concatenazione in cui si trovano. Egli ha imparato da secoli che i vizi posson diventare virtù e le virtù vizi<sup>93</sup>.

The moralist fights against what Musil calls “spirit” and that we may call “reason”, i. e.: the faculty that turns everything into a mathematical function, where the terms are constantly relativized.

The distinction between good and evil is a tool that allows Zolla to gain a clearer view on his time, on the society he lives in and on the men and women he lives with: it is a tool that allows to pay more attention. Thanks to the new kind of attention learned by the moralists, Zolla finds that the evil outside is only a reflection of the evil inside, which can be summarised in the following way:

il compiacimento è l'altro nome del male, è la forza pietrificante, adulterante, falsificatrice. La chiusura in se stessi preclude il disinteresse appassionato che muove il moralista. L'io è la prigione nella quale il mondo appare sogno<sup>94</sup>.

In this quote, we may underline that a true moralist is someone who is at the same time impartial and passionate, someone who has put aside his/her “I” by virtue of attention. Thanks to the “sacrifice” of his/her personal interests, the moralist is able to see that at the ground of every evil it is possible to

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<sup>92</sup> The meaning of society itself and of the subject that lives in it. See A. Moravia, *Introduzione*, in: A. Moravia, E. Zolla (a cura di), *I moralisti moderni*, cit., pp. 6-8.

<sup>93</sup> R. Musil, *La verità come relazione*, in: A. Moravia, E. Zolla (a cura di), *I moralisti moderni*, cit., p. 113-115, p. 113.

<sup>94</sup> E. Zolla, *L'io*, in: A. Moravia, E. Zolla (a cura di), *I moralisti moderni*, cit., p. 51.

find the identification with an “I” separated from what is outside. In other words, a consequent moralism turns into mysticism.

The anthology *I mistici* is divided in two parts. The first part analyses the pre-Christian version of mysticism, whose fundamental texts are the platonic ones. In Zolla’s opinion, each and every word of the platonic dialogues can be seen as a key to open up to the mystical experience. Therefore, as well as in the second part - focused on Christian mysticism - Zolla doesn’t take into account the gospels, similarly, in the first part, he starts from the post-platonic tradition and not from the platonic dialogues, that can be understood as the “gospels” of Greek mysticism<sup>95</sup>. The main character of the platonic background is, in Zolla’s opinion, the intertwining of *logos* and *mythos*, that can be seen as the preliminary practice on the way to experience the intellectual intuition<sup>96</sup>. It is possible to overcome both reason and imagination and to reach the intelligible world, by fully developing all the possibilities of reasoning and, contemporarily, by exploring imagination:

la verità che si svela all’intuizione intellettuale sta oltre le parole, non s’imprigiona nel linguaggio. Non è soltanto al di là del nome e della definizione razionale o logos, ma anche delle sue rappresentazioni o figure materiali e perfino al di là degli atti mentali che si protendono verso di essa<sup>97</sup>.

To become as much as possible godlike, which, according to Zolla, is the main aspect of the Greek idea of mysticism, means for the platonic tradition to overcome the limits of human thought and to achieve a noetic intuition of the all-one. The description of this kind of knowledge can be especially found in Plotin. Plotin, in Zolla’s words, «si pone nitidamente al di sopra della dicotomia razionale-irrazionale, e si fonda in maniera dichiaratamente mistica sull’intuizione intellettuale proposta da Platone»<sup>98</sup>. Intellectual intuition, i. e. *noesis*<sup>99</sup>, is, theoretically, the precondition for the dialectic method, for the symbolic knowledge and for ethics, understood as a complete transformation of human passions in light of the assimilation to the divine.

If the platonic tradition is useful to better understand a kind of knowledge beyond the opposition “rationality-irrationality”, it is however in Christian mysticism that Zolla finds a radical expression

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<sup>95</sup> See E. Zolla, *Perché non vi sono passi di Platone*, in: E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell’Occidente*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 109-112, p. 109.

<sup>96</sup> E. Zolla, *La nube del telaio*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>98</sup> *Ivi*, p. 54.

<sup>99</sup> See E. Zolla, *Introduzione*, in: E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell’Occidente*, vol. 1, cit., p. 90: «l’unità è il νοῦς, il conoscere non intellettualistico ma per identificazione».

of freedom. In other words, the mystic Christians provide an idea of the human being stripped of all ties, naked in front of God. Christian mysticism is, in this sense, pure madness; it is «pura follia che spezza l'ordinamento del mondo quale è, permettendo perciò l'invenzione di novità e la cura di un mondo malato»<sup>100</sup>. It is true that Zolla acknowledges in Christian mysticism also a theoretical background<sup>101</sup>, but the most relevant aspect that he stresses is the ethical one, i. e. the act of divest oneself of everything, of every idea, of every behaviour, of every compromise, in order to become a naked and foolish witness of oneself:

a ciascuno e a tutti è dato danzare [...]
Sono una torcia a te che mi vedi. Così sia.
Sono uno specchio a te che mi scorgi. Così sia.
Sono una porta a te che bussi da me. Così sia.
Sono una via a te che passi.<sup>102</sup>

Moreover, the Christian mystic is a living paradox, it is someone who says: «conduci te stesso come un uomo che non esiste»<sup>103</sup>; the rule of mysticism is the paradox: «regola dei padri antichi era visitare gli anziani, i quali giustamente ordinavano di rimanere in cella»<sup>104</sup>. Life itself is paradoxical, everything can become a way of liberation or the worst kind of captivity, nothing in the world is a value in itself, but everything, even going against every established law, may become a tool of liberation, a mean of contemplation, which is the only real, the only reasonable purpose. In other words, Christian mysticism teaches Zolla that it is possible to think and to live a moral behaviour beyond every established morality.

Intellectual intuition and mystical *askesis* converge in the alchemical tradition, which can be understood as a philosophical practice<sup>105</sup>. In alchemy, the main purpose is, at same time, the

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<sup>100</sup> E. Zolla, *Perché non vi sono passi delle Scritture e degli apostoli*, in: E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell'Occidente*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 237-242, p. 239.

<sup>101</sup> See, for example, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart (E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell'Occidente*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 355-395 (Augustine), 440-461 (Pseudo-Dionysius), 822-844 (Meister Eckhart)).

<sup>102</sup> *Atti di San Giovanni*, in: E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell'Occidente*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 249-252, pp. 249-250. It is an hymn, in: *Atti di San Giovanni*.

<sup>103</sup> *Detti*, in: E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell'Occidente*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 296-308, p. 302.

<sup>104</sup> *Ivi*, p. 306.

<sup>105</sup> In addition to E. Zolla, *Le meraviglie della natura*, cit., see, on the dark and the bright side of alchemy: E. Zolla, *Alchimia e senso del lavoro*, in «Tempo presente», num. 12, dicembre 1957, pp. 986-987; E. Zolla, *Septimius Felton e la letteratura alchemica inglese e americana*, in «Rivista di Estetica», num. 1, 1967, pp. 17-55; E. Zolla, *Un alchimista bostoniano e l'immaginazione organica*, in «Rivista di Estetica», num. 1, 1968, pp. 46-52; E. Zolla, *Alchimia e pittura*,

transmutation of the self and of reality. One may be tempted to understand alchemy either as a proto-chemistry or as a proto-psychology, but both these interpretations would lead us astray, since, from the alchemical point of view, there is no distinction between outer and inner reality. By manipulating matter, one is already transforming himself/herself and, by working on one's inner self, one is already transforming outer matter. Inner and outer reality are therefore two mirrors which reflect one another. However, since for us the starting point is our subjectivity, we may say, with Zolla:

dunque dalla trasmutazione dell'interiorità umana tutto dipende? Dall'ordine dentro di me dipende quello del mondo attorno a me? Se io divento pura e infinita luce, la materia attorno a me sarà del pari trasmutata: dal mio carattere dipende il mio destino, dal mio cuore il mio ambiente. I miei peccati sono lo spessore e l'asperità del reale<sup>106</sup>.

In other words, if I transform myself, reality changes; it depends on my eye, if I see darkness or light, it depends on my attitude, if the world appears like a hell or a paradise. This quote may seem to contradict what we said before, i. e. that inner and outer reality are two mirrors reflecting each other and that alchemy works on both sides contemporarily. One may understand what Zolla says as a profession of subjectivism: what is more subjective than the claim that from my inner world depends the outer reality? However, this interpretation would not be accurate, since the theoretical paradigm that allows Zolla to say that from interiority depends exteriority is that these two poles are, in the beginning, exactly the same

tutta la creazione sospira di tornare alla condizione aurea perfetta, quando il macrocosmo e il microcosmo formavano un sol vortice di sostanza purissima, respirante e armonioso<sup>107</sup>.

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in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 4, ottobre-dicembre 1973, pp. 432-438, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, pp. 401-407; E. Zolla, *L'alchimia come scienza tradizionale degli'imponderabili*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 2, aprile-giugno 1974, pp. 119-129, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, pp. 441-451; E. Zolla, *L'alchimista di Isfahan*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 3, luglio-settembre 1975, pp. 264-268, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, pp. 461-465; E. Zolla, *Alchimia taoista e asceti buddista*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 3, luglio-settembre 1976, pp. 207-214, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, pp. 721-728.

<sup>106</sup> E. Zolla, *Le meraviglie della natura*, cit., p. 387.

<sup>107</sup> Ivi, p. 383.

In order to better understand this idea, it may be useful to turn to the shamanic source, since it explains, even more precisely, the concept of subjectivity that informs Zolla's thought<sup>108</sup>. Both in alchemy and in the shamanic world, the dimension on which one acts is neither subjective nor objective, it is both subjective and objective: it is the imaginal dimension. Imagination, in this sense, is at the same time an intermediate world and a human faculty, it is the texture of reality and the place where a subjective action is immediately an objective fact.

Alchemy and shamanism are particularly relevant for Zolla's thought, since they provide a practical example of the *mundus imaginalis*, of a dream-like dimension where reality is fluid, where the subject and the object are intertwined.

If Platonism and mysticism help Zolla think a supra-rational faculty that puts into question the common idea of subjectivity, if alchemy and shamanism are useful examples of a way of life that, by going beyond the rigid distinction inner-outer, opens up to different dimensions of reality, Eastern philosophy allows Zolla to coherently develop the idea of non-dualism, the idea of the identity between subject and object<sup>109</sup>. Following these traditions, Zolla says: «tutto è [...] creato dalla mente, la quale non sussiste, simile al punto dello spazio da cui passi il volo d'un uccello»<sup>110</sup>.

Thanks to this quote, thanks to a radical non-dualism, the ideas of alchemy and shamanism become clearer: when Zolla said that “dall'ordine dentro di me dipende quello del mondo attorno a me”, he

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<sup>108</sup> See, regarding Zolla's category of shamanism, C. M. Cirino, *Sciamanesimo*, in «Conoscenza religiosa nuova serie», num. 1, 2012, pp. 93-109. See also, for instance: E. Zolla, *Lo sciamano e il metafisico*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 3-4, luglio-dicembre 1982, pp. 223-226, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, pp. 685-688; E. Zolla, *Lo sciamanesimo coreano*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 3-4, luglio-dicembre 1982, pp. 392-407, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, pp. 669-684; E. Zolla, *Due note sciamaniche*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 3-4, luglio-dicembre 1982, pp. 426-433, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, pp. 661-668; E. Zolla, *Korean shamanism*, in «RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics», num. 9, spring 1985, pp. 101-113.

<sup>109</sup> See, for instance: E. Zolla, *Le tre vie*, cit.; E. Zolla, *La filosofia perenne*, cit.; E. Zolla, *Discesa all'Ade e resurrezione*, cit.; E. Zolla, *I termini e il loro senso. Presentazione delle Yoga Upanisad*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 1, gennaio-marzo 1973, pp. 1-15, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, pp. 471-485; E. Zolla (a cura di), *Yoga Upanisad*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 1, gennaio-marzo 1973, pp. 16-110, article republished in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, pp. 486-581; E. Zolla, *Lo Yoga balinese*, in «Conoscenza religiosa», num. 2, aprile-giugno 1978, pp. 164-169, brano riedito in: E. Zolla, *Conoscenza religiosa. Scritti 1969-1983*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2006, pp. 629-634;

<sup>110</sup> E. Zolla, *La filosofia perenne*, cit., p. 155.

was talking about an I that is identified with the absolute mind; but this mind, on which everything depends and from which everything stems, doesn't exist, it is just a word, a black and non-dimensional dot.

## 2. Critique of modern subjectivity

### c) Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyse Zolla's understanding of modern subjectivity. I will, first of all, focus my attention on the critique of modern reason. This critique, developed by Zolla since the end of the fifties, is still important in the nineties<sup>111</sup>, which means that the problem of reason must be seen as a key point in Zolla's intellectual production.

Afterwards, I will analyse what Zolla understands under the notion of "triangular prison" and I will link it to the categories of "I" and "person". I will highlight that the identification with the three components of subjectivity – body-sensation, soul-emotion, reason – is strictly related both with the idea of a substantial I and with the overlapping between "who I am" and the person recognised by society. It will turn out that the triangular prison – body-sensation, soul-emotion, reason – and the categories of "I" and "person" imply each other.

In the end, I will examine Zolla's concept of fancy and doubling, which are, according to him, two of the most important factors in modern misunderstanding of subjectivity. In this regard, fancy has to be understood as that faculty which, by locking the subject in his/her own reveries, enhances the "I-person" illusion and hinders the subject from looking beyond his/her body-soul-reason idea of subjectivity.

In relation to the critique of modern society, Elémire Zolla's thought is particularly interesting, since he enriches Adorno's perspective through an extensive analysis of subjectivity, which benefits not only from philosophy and literature, but also from a thorough anthropological research.

This research directly affects Zolla, who wants to find an answer to the following question: why did the modern subject turn into a massified, broken, alienated subject? Since to answer this question would mean to be also able to find a way out of that condition, Zolla's critique must be seen as the preliminary step in the arising of a new kind of subjectivity.

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<sup>111</sup> See E. Zolla, *La nube del telaio*, cit.

## d) Critique of reason: the dialectic of Enlightenment

As we will see below, modern subjectivity is characterized, in Zolla's opinion, by the oblivion of two important faculties: imagination<sup>112</sup> and intellect<sup>113</sup>. The former is confused with fancy, the latter is usually identified with reason.

The origin of the oblivion of these two faculties can be traced back to a shift in the notion of reason itself, which has become a synonym of "calculation" and has prevailed over any other aspect of human subjectivity. Mentioning E. Cassirer, Zolla says that

la ragione nel XVIII secolo cessa di significare la facoltà in grado di menare alle soglie del trascendente per ridursi alla semplice energia di costruzione o scomposizione di concetti<sup>114</sup>.

On the ground of this shift and due to the supremacy of that faculty, the crisis of modern world has grown, resulting at the same time in the drying up of mankind, in the destruction of nature and in the flattening of reality to a one-dimensional level.

These aspects can be especially displayed through Sade's literary works, since they are, both for the authors of the Frankfurt School and for Zolla, the best example of a coherent development of the modern-enlightened category of reason. In an anthology of Sade's writings edited in 1961<sup>115</sup>, Zolla, referring to Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, states that the identification of the human being with reason has been one of the most relevant causes for the disruption of mankind, as it has converted each and every subject into an object<sup>116</sup>. Furthermore, it has converted the entire world in a *gesetzlose Gesetzmässigkeit*<sup>117</sup>, where there are no more subjects nor objects, but only means to be exploited:

come l'uomo si atteggia a domatore di circo con i suoi istinti e li tiene a bada con la frusta della volontà, così si atteggia a domatore della natura la quale pertanto diviene incrocio di ruote, gioco di elementi da sfruttare e nulla più<sup>118</sup>.

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<sup>112</sup> See E. Zolla, *Verità segrete esposte in evidenza*, cit., p. 426.

<sup>113</sup> E. Zolla, *Che cos'è la tradizione*, cit., p. 126.

<sup>114</sup> E. Zolla, *La nube del telaio*, cit., p. 81.

<sup>115</sup> See E. Zolla, *Prefazione*, in: D. De Sade, *Le opere*, cit., pp. 11-65.

<sup>116</sup> See *ivi*, p. 49.

<sup>117</sup> *Ivi*, p. 50.

<sup>118</sup> E. Zolla, *Melville e l'abbandono dello zodiaco*, cit., p. 28.

Enlightenment is the first movement that, by promoting a depersonalizing concept of reason, leads to massification, i. e. to alienation, loss of consciousness and standardisation. If subjectivity means reason and if reason means, in Adorno's terms, computation, then a perfect and efficient subject is someone who is completely identified with the calculation process, someone who is not anymore a "who", but an automatic function:

si è ravvisata in Sade la rappresentazione compiuta dell'esito della dialettica dell'illuminismo, quando lo schema dell'attività viene a svuotare l'attività di ogni suo significato intrinseco. Di fatto egli crea un mondo fantastico dove il personaggio è assente, dove una funzionalità perfetta è al servizio di sé stessa<sup>119</sup>.

There is no more place for a relationship between human subjects. The other is either an object, a slave or a master<sup>120</sup>: the only accepted logic is that of domination, the only reasonable argument about anything is its usefulness or uselessness.

Anyway, pure sadism is really rare and, even if it existed, it could not be described: pure sadism would turn into pure nature, in that «l'assoluta efficienza e meccanizzazione è irrepresentabile»<sup>121</sup>. Actually, a fulfilled sadism, i. e. a sadism turned into nature, would not be sadism, because unaware, spontaneous and not meditated violence is not sadistic violence anymore<sup>122</sup>.

Precisely for this reason, Sade is so important, since he provides the best proof, a proof by contradiction, that a coherent Enlightenment is impossible<sup>123</sup>. He is so talented that he is able to stand at the border of incommunicability. Through this ability, through the radicalization of modern subjectivity, he provides a key to escape from the illusion of the modern autonomous human being, of the bourgeois logic of alienation and competition, which hides itself behind empty words full of an abstract sentimentalism<sup>124</sup>.

Sade illustrates that captious sentimentalism is the very mask of sadism, since it gives the illusion of humanity right there, where there is only an automaton, since it gives the illusion of vitality right there, where there is only efficiency. The sadistic subject is certainly able to talk about deep feelings,

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<sup>119</sup> E. Zolla, *Prefazione*, in: D. De Sade, *Le opere*, cit., p. 55.

<sup>120</sup> E. Zolla, *Sade*, in «Aut Aut», num. 41, settembre 1957, pp. 415-424, p. 415. E. Zolla, *Prefazione*, in: D. De Sade, *Le opere*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>121</sup> Ivi, p. 55.

<sup>122</sup> Ivi, pp. 27-36.

<sup>123</sup> Ivi, p. 49.

<sup>124</sup> See, about the relation between bourgeois society and mass society, E. Zolla, *Eclissi dell'intellettuale*, cit., pp. 33-56, 61-62.

but these are manipulated feelings, as if there were a control room that dictates what and when something must be felt:

il sentimento è sempre manipolato, meccanizzato: al fine di farlo scattare, scoppiare. La compassione, come ogni altro moto dell'animo, dev'essere asservita, con calcolo deliberato e furente, al solo fine di farla esplodere, sicché lo spasimo come conflagrazione meccanica diventa l'unico scopo dell'esistenza<sup>125</sup>.

The sadistic subject pushes to the extreme consequences the bourgeois “logic of having” instead of “being”, since the body is seen as an abstract property that satisfies abstract desires: it is the body or the sensation or the emotion we *have* and with which anything can be done, not the body, the sensation and the emotion we *are*<sup>126</sup>.

The alienation of the modern sadistic subject is therefore a consequence of the primacy of the calculating reason. On one side this reason leads to a kind of inter-subjectivity ruled by the logic of oppression and by the reification of the other; on the other side, it turns into a masochistic logic, since it applies the same violence to the subject itself.

In a word: modern rationality appears to be, in Zolla's early writings, the most important element in the decline of Western culture, which doesn't seem to be able to overcome the sadistic world and to understand who the human being is or might be.

### e) The triangular prison: reason, soul and body

The above mentioned critique of reason must be better analysed, put into perspective and relativized, in order to not misunderstand or simplify Zolla's thought. It is not a matter of fighting against modern reason in order to return to a pre-modern category of rationality, nor it is a matter of replacing reason with the irrational or of focusing on heart, emotions, body and sensations. A subject that gets rid of reason in order, for example, to surrender to emotions or physical sensations isn't in fact more free than a rationalist.

*In the first place*, this kind of “getting rid of reason” is a reaction against something known rather than an opening up to something different. A “reaction against” can never be free of the object against which it reacts<sup>127</sup>. Therefore, it is likely to replace the old ideology, the ideology of reason, with a

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<sup>125</sup> E. Zolla, *Prefazione*, in: D. De Sade, *Le opere*, cit., p. 57.

<sup>126</sup> E. Zolla, *Eclissi dell'intellettuale*, cit., p. 33.

<sup>127</sup> See E. Zolla, *Le potenze dell'anima*, cit, p. 20.

new, reactive, one. Since it stands against the old ideology, the new one perpetuates the same inner mechanism and leads to an equivalent kind of submission<sup>128</sup>.

*Secondly* and consequently, the problem doesn't lie within the attributes of one or another aspect of subjectivity. It is not a matter of choosing among thoughts, emotions or sensations, among rationalism/scientism, romanticism or materialism, among reason, soul or body<sup>129</sup>. The problem doesn't lie in the chosen object, but in the process that leads to a choice which is, in fact, an identification with *something* that cannot define the human being as a whole.

The identification with one's sensations, with one's emotions or with one's thoughts implies the flattening on the plane of immanence, which means, from a sociological perspective, the surrender to what society dictates: when the subject doesn't find an end in himself/herself, he/she is likely to be submitted to an ideology, i. e. to slogans that seem to be reasonable because are able to satisfy the single need<sup>130</sup>. In this kind of process, both the subject and the object lose their complexity and stratification: the subject *is* the sensation/emotion/thought he/she *has*, and the sensation/emotion/thought means nothing more than its contingent appearance. In other words, the fulfilment of a need becomes an end in itself; this process hides the need for a purpose broader than the single fulfilment.

*Finally*, both from a cultural perspective and from an anthropological one, it is possible to notice that the identification with one part turns to its opposite in a never ending circle. Since the three parts in which modern subjectivity is identified are unable to provide – both alone and altogether - a fulfilling idea of the human being, it is inevitable that the finitude of one part is substituted by the finitude of the other parts. This means, in social terms, that, if a society is based on the idea that the only possible happiness resides within the fulfilment of contingent needs, this society becomes the place where the circle is perpetuated; it becomes the place of a never ending hypocrisy, which tries to put happiness back in the future, in order to hide the fact that even when the need had been fulfilled, there would not be any kind of joy:

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>129</sup> These terms can be used as synonyms. Reason, soul-emotion and body-sensation are the only aspects that, in Zolla's view, Western societies and cultures recognise; see E. Zolla, *Le potenze dell'anima*, cit., pp. 19-23. The identification of the human being with reason leads to the ideology called "rationalism-scientism" i. e., from an historical point of view, to Enlightenment; the identification with soul-emotion leads to the ideology of "sentimentalism", i. e., from an historical point of view, to Romanticism; the identification with body-sensation, leads to "materialism", which is the final outcome of Enlightenment itself.

<sup>130</sup> E. Zolla, *Le potenze dell'anima*, cit., p. 21.

di quando in quando [il soggetto] s'avvede pure di aggirarsi fra i tre muri di una segreta, chiusa ogni uscita verso la libertà, e osa allora domandare a che giovi adorare la scienza [rationalism]; gli si replica che essa promuove tecniche nuove, largendo appagamenti sensibili e perfino sensazionali a tutti i bisogni [material and emotional needs]. Ma i bisogni, corporei o psichici, egli si accorge, nemmeno essi hanno un valore assoluto [...] ma se anche giunge a capire quale desolazione incomba su di lui qualora persista a venerare il corpo e ad adorare la ragione scientifica, invece di spezzare il triangolo, si abbandonerà a declamazioni sui "valori" sentimentali [...]<sup>131</sup>.

Reason/scientific rationalism, soul/sentimentalism and body/materialism are considered by Zolla the vertices of the triangular prison where the modern subject is confined. They are, in one word, the only aspects that this subject acknowledges and with which is identified, but they are not able to give meaning to life:

dall'infernale, triangolare angustia chi mai evade? Chi mai confessa che i tre lati non definiscono l'uomo intero, ma soltanto l'atrofizzato; che tra quelle tre pareti non solo non vige la pace, ma neanche si concepiscono scopi che la promettano? A che pro vivere, infatti<sup>132</sup>?

Modern subjects are identified with one of these three aspects, according to the context: there is a place to be rational, a place to be emotional, a place to take care of the body. One of these three parts is each time predominant with regard to the individual character, to the socio-cultural context, to the historical period; but each of them, even when they are co-present, is unable to answer the question "why do I live?". The only meaning they provide is a contingent purpose, which can be manipulated by society itself in order to perpetuate its functioning model.

Therefore, these subjects prove themselves to be machines instead of human beings: they are perfectly able to analyse the surrounding environment and equally capable of stimulating emotional reactions, as far as they don't come into conflict with efficiency<sup>133</sup>; on the contrary, they are no more able to act spontaneously, to really get in touch with one another, to exceed the surface of *clichés*, automatic thoughts, standardised behavioural patterns.

## f) "I" and "person"

These modern subjects, these mass-men and women that don't know anything beyond calculation, efficiency and abstract sentimentalism; these completely alienated automata live under the illusion

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<sup>131</sup> Ivi, p. 20.

<sup>132</sup> Ivi, p. 21.

<sup>133</sup> E. Zolla, *Prefazione*, in: D. De Sade, *Le opere*, cit., p. 57.

that the triangle is what and who they are. Body, soul and reason are, in this regard, the three components of their “ego” or “person”, which are the fundamental illusions of modernity.

Zolla speaks about “ego” as the illusion of being an individual “I” completely separated from the otherness, may it be another subject or an object. Following Hume<sup>134</sup> in Western culture and many different Eastern philosophies<sup>135</sup>, Zolla states that this “I” is an illusion, since it is insubstantial. Referring to an “impersonal experience” of his youth, Zolla asserts in *Lo stupore infantile* (1994):

*Io era un ammassarsi d'impressioni casuali, cui si addossavano delle responsabilità, cui si infliggevano dei conti da saldare, ma a guardarlo con attenzione, quell'affastellio si sbriciolava e sperdeva. Quanti io potevano essere additati nell'arruffio reale, quante persone diverse, chiamale pure morti, dèi, demoni, finzioni, invenzioni, inganni.*<sup>136</sup>

Each subject is a combination of sensations, emotions, images, thoughts, linked together by memory. If we try to define or even to tell something about our “I”, if we try to understand who this “I” is, without referring to our biography, without drawing from the tight baggage of our memory, it fades away like a dream or a nightmare. This certainty arises in Zolla’s youth and becomes more and more complex as he starts to study the category of subjectivity both from a juridical and a philosophical perspective. The legal category of “person” is indeed strictly bound to the concept of “I”, and one of the first Zolla’s short publications concerns the problem of the word “person” posed by Dowdall in «The Times Literary Supplement» of 1948.

Dowdall states that the word “person” means «the occupation of a particular socially recognized position or status as distinguished from the individual character of the occupant»<sup>137</sup>. Zolla writes in response:

person, personality, individuality are a relatively recent feature in history, and cannot, therefore, be considered absolute. Even human personality is a contingent practical construction: an institution<sup>138</sup>.

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<sup>134</sup> E. Zolla, *La nube del telaio*, cit., p. 75. Hume is already important for the discussion about “I”, “person” and “personality” in 1948. See E. Zolla, *The word “person”*, in «The Times Literary Supplement», 23 ottobre 1948.

<sup>135</sup> See, for example, E. Zolla, *A ciascuno il suo buddhismo, e sullo sfondo il sorriso del Buddha*, in «Corriere della Sera», 10 dicembre 1993, article republished by G. Marchianò with the title *Gli estremi da evitare: la lezione buddhista* in: E. Zolla, *Gli arcani del potere. Elzeviri 1960-2000*, Bur, Milano 2009, pp. 199-201.

<sup>136</sup> E. Zolla, *Lo stupore infantile*, cit., p. 33.

<sup>137</sup> H. C. Dowdall, *The word “person”*, in «The Times Literary Supplement», 8. may 1948.

<sup>138</sup> E. Zolla, *The word “person”*, cit., p. 597.

In this article Zolla finds an important connection between the problem of “I” and the problem of “personality”. If the “I” is hardly definable and appears to be an illusion rather than a substance<sup>139</sup>, the word “person” suggests a further level of illusion: from an historical and etymological perspective, it has to do with “mask” and theatre, with a ritual context; from a juridical point of view, it is an institution, i. e. a human construction, not an ontological or absolute reality; from an anthropological standpoint, it is the social function and not the character: it is more “what I do” than “who I am”.

On one hand, the identification with the “I” means an identification with the past, with the character as something “mine”, with the psychological structure in which I recognise myself; it is namely a projection and a solidification of my past, as if this past were me; it is the outcome of a distorted relation with time, an attempt to freeze it, in order to have the impression of stability and difference: of unicity.

On the other hand, the identification with our “person” means a surrender to the mask that society dictates, a surrender to a space outside ourselves, a projection into the image of ourselves as it is supposed to be seen by the others.

If it is possible to find in Zolla’s writings a distinction between “I” and “person”, it is also important to notice that his use of these categories seems to be ambiguous, as already in 1948 and especially in later works, he has the tendency to use these notions as synonyms<sup>140</sup>. This ambiguity doesn’t result from an author’s misunderstanding or confusion, but from the matter itself, as it is at the same time necessary and impossible to distinguish between the social construction and the psychological one. Depending on the standpoint he takes, Zolla therefore stresses the differences or focuses on their common elements.

### g) Doubling and fancy

One aspect can be highlighted as the core of modern subjectivity, which is to be understood as the result of the interrelation between “I” and “person”: both these illusions stem from a kind of splitting, a kind of double-dealing with oneself, that is at the heart of the modern misunderstanding of subjectivity, at the heart of the loss of spontaneity<sup>141</sup>:

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>140</sup> See for example: E. Zolla, *Le potenze dell’anima*, cit., p. 99; E. Zolla, *La filosofia perenne*, cit., p. 158.

<sup>141</sup> E. Zolla, *Eclissi dell’intellettuale*, cit., p. 93.

la decadenza della spontaneità già era stata osservata da Hegel quando affermava che il borghese non gode il suo godimento ma gode di immaginare di godere; ora tale processo di alienazione da se stessi è giunto al punto che è diventato il carattere generale e difficilmente riconoscibile dell'umanità<sup>142</sup>.

Doubling is, according to Zolla, at the origin not only of alienation, but also of the sadistic approach to life described in the first paragraph. Only when there is a complete dissociation between my action and my thoughts, it is possible to act as if I were a machine, as if my acts and emotions were to be manipulated at will. The strict relationship between sadism and doubling highlights an important aspect of the modern subjectivity: in Zolla's opinion, the main charge against this subject is in fact that he/she is lifeless and squalid<sup>143</sup>, rather than cruel; even Sade's pornography, even Sade's description of violence, is, at a closer and deeper look, void and meaningless. It is an attempt to become pure, schematic, planned violence, to go beyond the subject and the object of violence itself; it is an attempt to be persuaded of being alive by an outer act of volition:

la colpa nasce dal volontarismo: non si può evitare di esercitare violenza su se stessi se si agisce per volontà astratta. La volontà astratta significa assenza di motivazioni reali, cioè non prestabilite e calcolate: essa chiede soccorso dapprima a una casistica, poi impara semplicemente ad orientarsi secondo la legge dell'agglomerato nel quale per accidente si trovi ad operare<sup>144</sup>.

Self-alienation, sadism and doubling, which are the components of the false "I", are enhanced by a specific concept of will, which involves the idea that each and every action comes from an abstract rule that is applied to our body by effort and struggle.

The rules that are applied, by the fact of being an abstraction, by the fact of not being embodied, are usually the general rules of the society we live in, or, as in Sade, their rejection. In both cases, anyway, they testify the dependency on society. In this sense, the only kind of accepted subject is someone who is acceptable by society or someone who has created his/her own society, such as that one of slaves in Sade's castles.

From Zolla's standpoint, on the contrary, it is really clear that no modern subject can be free, can truly express himself/herself, if he/she doesn't get rid of society, if he/she doesn't get rid of the implicit paradigm of modernity. Modern society, as a matter of fact, repeats over and over again, but at a different level, the same paradigm of modern subjectivity, the same triangular prison that doesn't

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<sup>142</sup> E. Zolla, *La musicologia di T. W. Adorno*, cit., p. 408.

<sup>143</sup> E. Zolla, *Eclissi dell'intellettuale*, cit., p. 58.

<sup>144</sup> Ivi, p. 95.

recognize anything beyond body, soul and reason. By doing this, it also justifies this construction and precludes the subject from reaching new dimensions of himself/herself.

As already mentioned in the second paragraph of this chapter, the attempt to justify and perpetuate the functioning model of society and subjectivity has led to three different types of ideologies, depending on which part has been considered to be the most important: materialism, when the entire world has been identified with its physical aspect; sentimentalism/irrationalism, when a general and unclear idea of “feeling” has been considered at the heart of subjectivity; rationalism when the pattern applied to reality has been identified with reality itself<sup>145</sup>.

The human being, identified with a superficial I/person subjected to ideologies *ad hoc*, is reduced to a more or less coherent train of thoughts mixed with emotional fragments and fancies. In one word, he/she is reduced to the Dostoevskij’s underground man:

l’uomo del sottosuolo non ha più alcuna forza di volontà, o meglio, per lui l’azione diventa un problema di forza volitiva, egli deve infondersi una tenacia tutta astratta, che consenta il trapasso dal vagheggiamento trasognato alla contrazione muscolare<sup>146</sup>.

The exacerbation of will, the impossibility to act spontaneously, the need for a rule as a pre-condition of any action, turns into a complete loss of will, that leaves the subject alone with himself/herself, unable to feel the world outside and to act in it.

If the identification with body, soul and reason is the prison in which the modern subject is captured, fancy, as the faculty of doubling and day-dreaming, as the faculty of the underground man, is the guardian. Fancy means to be doubled, to be oneself for the other self that lives in a day-dream<sup>147</sup>; a subject that is split into an observer and an observed, a subject that is not able to think, feel or do anything without calculation, i. e., without looking at himself/herself as a mechanism that needs to be activated, is a prisoner that lives his/her entire life without any real connection with himself/herself and with the surrounding world. Body, soul and reason - the only human aspects recognised – are understood by interior fancies as something that has to be stimulated, that has to be pushed, as if the subject were a machine and not an organism. The body has to be efficient, the soul has to be thrilled by constantly new emotions, reason has to be completely dehumanised.

Fancy means, therefore, never to be natural, it means to be obsessed by confused and fragmented images, full of unperceived emotions, neglected sensations, unspoken desires of revenge, power,

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<sup>145</sup> E. Zolla, *Le potenze dell’anima*, cit., p. 21.

<sup>146</sup> E. Zolla, *Storia del fantasticare*, cit., p. 442-443.

<sup>147</sup> Ivi, p. 334.

success; full of hidden envy towards everything and everyone that is not ourselves. Fancy is the cause of a never-ending day-dream, where

the day-dreamer is insensitive, complacent, self-conscious, shy, hesitant, incapable of swift reactions and of ready assessments. No true sympathy for others or for the cosmos can ever be expected of a day-dreamer<sup>148</sup>.

In this regard, fancy could be understood as the core of modern subjectivity, since it is the faculty that at the same time encloses the subject in himself/herself and makes it difficult to really come in touch with oneself and with the world around.

It is the opposite of attention<sup>149</sup>, which can be defined as an impersonal opening that allows the emergence *of* and the connection *between* inner and outer reality:

l'attenzione pura non rientra nell'io; quieta, silenziosa, impersonale, esente da interessi, sentimenti, pensieri, parole, costituisce la consapevolezza stupita che li precede e ne forma la premessa. Non è un emendamento di noi stessi, è il risultato di un passo indietro rispetto a noi. Nemmeno si tratta di uno sforzo, perché emerge da un semplice stacco. Dell'esistenza rappresenta l'essere che la fonda, il principio ed il fine<sup>150</sup>.

On one side, the separation between an observer and an observed caused by fancy precludes the possibility to overcome the triangular prison; paradoxically, this kind of doubling brings to a deeper identification with one of the three components of modern subjectivity, since self-consciousness means, in this case, to be completely locked into one's own "I". On the other side, attention, which could appear really similar to self-consciousness, is, actually, its opposite: it is a step back from ourselves that makes it possible to act spontaneously, without being submitted to the action, the thought, the feeling, the sensation we experience.

In the end, we can say that, in Zolla's opinion, the modern construction of the idea of subjectivity is the construction of the illusion of an I/person that needs to state his/her existence by destroying any spontaneity, by being stuck into *reveries* that give a sense of I-ness, but that, at the same time, lock up every subject into his/her own world.

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<sup>148</sup> E. Zolla, *The uses of imagination and the decline of the West*, cit., p. 27.

<sup>149</sup> E. Zolla, *Le potenze dell'anima*, cit., p. 190.

<sup>150</sup> E. Zolla, *La nube del telaio*, cit., p. 110.

### 3. The spiritual dimension: imagination, intellectual intuition and mysticism

#### a) Introduction

The analysis led in the previous chapter was aimed at understanding the main aspects of modern subjectivity. However, this investigation wasn't an end in itself. On the contrary, as already mentioned in the introduction to that chapter, the analysis was a preliminary step.

If the modern subject turns out to be an ill subject, if personal health, i. e. integrity and spontaneity, collides with the identification with one's "I-person" and with the social structure, which needs unaware men and women in order to perpetuate its functioning model, what does it mean to be a healthy subject?

In order to understand Zolla's answer, I will firstly analyse his understanding of the notion of spirit. Thereafter, I will focus my attention on the role of imagination, in order to understand in which sense and to which extent imagination can be described as a part of the spiritual dimension. I will, then, turn to the category of "intellectual intuition" as that form of knowledge that reaches the peak of the spiritual dimension. In Zolla's opinion, the oblivion of imagination and intellectual intuition has reduced the human being to a one-dimensional man/woman. To the contrary, a focus on imagination and intellectual intuition could unlock unexpected dimensions and provide useful cognitive tools. They could be an important element in the fight against outer and inner captivity, against the overwhelming power of society and the supremacy of fancy.

Eventually, I will contextualize the mystical experience within the more general notion of "mystic life". Following Zolla's ideas, mysticism can be seen as a specific way of life, that provides new perspectives on subjectivity itself and, furthermore, a complete different approach to modern issues.

#### b) The category of "spirit"

Before talking of the spiritual dimension, it's important to underline that thoughts, emotions and sensations - i. e. reason, soul and body - are not a problem as such, provided that they don't assume to be the only elements that define subjectivity. In Zolla's opinion, it is possible to reach a fourth dimension beyond body, soul and reason, i. e. beyond the illusion of ego and personality: the spiritual dimension. However, this dimension is not to be understood as a negation of the other three, but as

their fulfilment, as the condition to be free from them and therefore to become able to entirely enjoy them.

Zolla states in 1971:

l'uomo moderno ignora che cosa siano l'intuizione intellettuale, la spontaneità sentimentale, la naturalezza dei bisogni, cioè non ha spirito, e la sua anima non è libera. Egli crede che la spontaneità sia una sorta di eruzione di magma dal subconscio, una dissipazione, che l'intuizione intellettuale sia un'attività irrazionale, un arbitrio soggettivo. Così ignora la salda felicità, che proviene dal saper porre nel giusto rapporto le varie parti che formano l'uomo. Anzitutto l'anima e l'animo debbono subordinarsi allo spirito e quindi i sentimenti vanno non già repressi, ma orientati nella giusta direzione [...] <sup>151</sup>.

Thanks to this quote, it is possible to better understand, what Zolla means under the notion of spirit and how it is related to the notion of subjectivity. Firstly, it is important to underline that the spiritual world is separated from the world of the soul.

“Soul” has two meanings in Zolla’s thought: on one side, it can be used as a general concept that summarizes all human faculties; on the other side and more specifically, it means both the emotions’ faculty and the place where fancy or imagination may grow; it is the faculty and the place where the subject may be imprisoned in his/her own dream or may be open to spirit, i. e. to the bridge-dimension between interiority and exteriority. In this regard, fancy and imagination are the same faculty that turn to opposite directions:

la fantasia può avere una doppia vita: in cima all'uomo, a contatto con lo spirito [...] oppure scenderà in basso, nelle reni (secondo la metafora ebraica), dove essa diventa fantasticheria, indugio vizioso sulle immagini. <sup>152</sup>

“Spirit” means a super-human dimension, i. e. a dimension that can’t be constrained into a mere subjective perspective: a purified soul is immediately not anymore a human soul, but spirit itself. Spirit is the place where inside and outside communicate, it is a non-dimensional dimension, where subject and object lose their boundaries. It is like the wind or the breath; actually, it is the wind-breath that keeps in touch interiority and exteriority <sup>153</sup>. In Judaism, it is *ruach*, «lo spirito animante il cui risultato animato è l'anima» <sup>154</sup>; in Greece, it is the *pneuma*, «un vento gagliardo e inaspettato o una

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<sup>151</sup> E. Zolla, *Che cos'è la tradizione*, cit., p. 126.

<sup>152</sup> E. Zolla, *Le potenze dell'anima*, cit., p. 190.

<sup>153</sup> Ivi, pp. 59-60.

<sup>154</sup> Ivi, p. 162.

brezza dolce e purificante»<sup>155</sup>; spirit-*pneuma* is the root of subjectivity, despite its impersonality: «ciò che l'uomo è, lo deve allo spirito, pur essendo esso impersonale»<sup>156</sup>. In this regard, it becomes clear why Zolla claims that, without the notion and the experience of the spiritual word, the modern subject is a smaller subject, a subject that can't even imagine what joy may be, what it should mean to be a human being, what reality is.

On the contrary, if what is finite in the human being lives in connection with the infinite, if soul looks up at the spirit, then a different idea of subjectivity may arise, then a different kind of joy may permeate this renewed subject:

la gioia perfetta esclude il sentimento stesso della gioia perché l'anima colma dall'oggetto non ha un solo angolo disponibile per dire io<sup>157</sup>.

The kind of joy that Zolla is referring to is not anymore personal, it has nothing to do with social recognition or self-sense, but it emerges from a different way of being-in-the-world. Therefore, the word “spirit” doesn't have necessarily a religious meaning; it rather suggests a dimension that, by the fact of being above finitude, constitutes the foundation of finitude itself.

This description of the spiritual world may lead to the conclusion that its transcendence with regard to the sensible world implies a dualistic ontology, since the two worlds, despite their communication, are completely different one from the other. This conclusion, however, is true but relative. It is true in the sense that, from a human perspective, it is useful to think at least these two dimensions, in order to not be trapped in the world as it appears. On the other side, it is relative, because, from the standpoint of the Absolute itself, there cannot be true distinction: everything is the Absolute. Nevertheless, in order to understand the role of imagination and the meaning of an imaginal and archetypal world, it may be useful to think in terms of distinctions. In this regard, the best depiction may be that one of R. Guénon, summarised by Zolla in the encyclopaedia article “Simbologia”:

ogni esistenza, procedendo da un principio metafisico che è la fonte della sua realtà, manifesta il principio, appunto, secondo una modalità specifica sicché, da un ordine di realtà all'altro, tutte le cose sono concatenate e si corrispondono, creando così l'armonia, la gerarchia del tutto, la quale, nella molteplicità della manifestazione, è come un riflesso della stessa unità principiale<sup>158</sup>.

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<sup>155</sup> Ivi, p. 179.

<sup>156</sup> Ivi, p. 180.

<sup>157</sup> E. Zolla, *Simone Weil*, cit. p. 30.

<sup>158</sup> E. Zolla, *Simbologia*, cit., 8 paragraph.

The different worlds are therefore different manifestations of the absolute identity, which reflects itself at many levels. The spiritual world is on one side the macro-category that describes these invisible levels, but on the other side, as its etymology says, it also refers to the experience of unity and identity.

The sensible world is not condemned nor denied. On the contrary, it sparkles in new colours, since the standpoint from which it is seen is a symbolic one:

The first step towards myth-making would generally be to view nature as teeming with entelechies [i. e. archetypes] [...] once all this is realized, a rock, a rose, a butterfly become more alive, not things lived, but living, not shaped forms, but forms being shaped. One perceives their archetypes gathering into their peculiar specific shape<sup>159</sup>.

### c) Imagination and intellectual intuition

Around the XVII century, alongside with the oblivion-misunderstanding of the category of “intellect”, an equally important misunderstanding or oblivion took place<sup>160</sup>: imagination, which especially in the Neoplatonic tradition had been studied as a faculty capable to get in touch with an intermediate world, started to become indiscernible from fancy<sup>161</sup>. The contemporary extinction of these two faculties – intuitive intellect and imagination -, their replacement with the overwhelming supremacy of fancy and reason, are not a coincidence. They are strictly related with the oblivion of the spiritual dimension and of the notion of the Absolute:

about two centuries ago something strange and evil happened in the West. Contact was generally lost with the idea of a transcendent, absolute truth. And of course, as a result, day-dreaming and imagination became indistinguishable<sup>162</sup>.

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<sup>159</sup> E. Zolla, *The poet as a myth-maker and shaman*, cit., pp. 427, 429.

<sup>160</sup> See E. Zolla, *The uses of imagination and the decline of the West*, cit., p. 63. The close relationship between imagination and intellectual intuition (which is, in the first place an intuition of the archetypal world, and, ultimately, the complete identification with the Absolute) is analysed, for instance, in E. Zolla, *The poet as a myth-maker and shaman*, cit.

<sup>161</sup> On imagination in Zolla, see H. A. Cavallera, *La luce delle idee e il ruolo dell'immaginazione in Elémire Zolla*, in: G. Marchianò (a cura di), *Labirinti della mente, visioni del mondo. Il lascito intellettuale di Elémire Zolla nel XXI secolo*, Società bibliografica toscana, Sinalunga 2012, pp. 63-86; see also F. Guardo, *Immaginazione*, in «Conoscenza religiosa nuova serie», num. 1, 2012, pp. 77-91.

<sup>162</sup> E. Zolla, *The uses of imagination and the decline of the West*, cit., p. 63.

The two kind of oblivion made it impossible even to think about a kind of knowledge and reason different from the Cartesian one<sup>163</sup>.

In ancient Greek and Medieval tradition, as well as, for example, in Sufi tradition, in some Persian philosophical schools and in the Indian school called *Vedānta*, the distinction between fancy and imagination was clear: while the first one locks the subjects in a prison of images and emotions that precludes any possible contact with reality, the second one raises the subjects above themselves and enables them to get in touch with a world of images that symbolizes the archetypal world and that makes sense of the material world as well:

in *Vedānta* imagination is the faculty that corresponds to the merely formal, subtle, incorporeal level of manifestation. Macrocosmically it corresponds to pure forms, to the archetypes of nature, to the ideas of all possible species – to what is called cosmic imagination<sup>164</sup>.

Therefore, imagination has a subjective and a cosmic meaning at the same time. For this reason, it may be called the «central rung of the ladder that leads from wordly appearances to their origin»<sup>165</sup>. Properly speaking, it is not just a faculty of the soul but «la dimora stessa della psiche»<sup>166</sup>, that can be a mean of knowledge or the place of the worst deceit<sup>167</sup>:

it can either turn inward, to the source of its light, or it can dally among the images it has stored in memory, not in order to gain knowledge, but for the sake of the images themselves. The two attitudes define respectively inspired vision and daydreaming, the former leading to the highest goal, the latter to spiritual degradation<sup>168</sup>.

If imagination turns to «to the source of its light» - i. e.: if imagination recognizes itself as the spiritual dimension where the archetypal world may express itself through images - then it may become a means of liberation for the subject; it may become the first step on the way of exceeding the triangular prison, in order to get in touch with a different “multi-levelled” world. In an article, Zolla claims that the poet is a myth-maker who can disclose this multi-levelled reality:

the vision of entelechies or archetypes at work throughout the realms of a multi-levelled Nature is the backdrop of all myth-making poetry [...] the poet as a myth-maker describes the ladder of being from

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<sup>163</sup> E. Zolla, *Che cos'è la tradizione*, cit., p. 60.

<sup>164</sup> E. Zolla, *The uses of imagination and the decline of the West*, cit. p. 15.

<sup>165</sup> Ivi, p. 19.

<sup>166</sup> E. Zolla, *Incontro con l'Androgino*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>167</sup> E. Zolla, *The uses of imagination and the decline of the West*, cit., pp. 25-27.

<sup>168</sup> Ivi, p. 27.

visible objects to the archetypes which he imaginably sees hovering above or descending into them. His ecstasy at the sight is part of the scene<sup>169</sup>.

In other words, imagination may become an “imaginative contemplation” which leads to the gates of a naked contemplation: of intellectual intuition<sup>170</sup>. In order to better understand this step, it may be useful to recall the difference, set by Plutarch, between Isis and Osiris. Zolla refers the following Plutarch’s claim:

tinte di colori diversi sono le vesti di Iside, a segno del suo potere sulla materia, la quale tutte le forme accoglie e tutte le vicissitudini subisce, potendo diventare luce e tenebra, giorno e notte, fuoco e acqua, vita e morte, inizio e fine. Ma senza ombra né varietà è la veste di Osiride, che ha un solo colore, quello della luce<sup>171</sup>.

If we transpose the identification of Isis with matter to the identification with imagination, which actually is the matter impressed by the archetypes, we may see in Plutarch’s quote a perfect exemplification of the relation between imagination and intellectual intuition, which are two different aspects of contemplation. Through the contemplation of the imaginal world, which opens up to the subject that has set aside his/her own I-person, it is possible to exceed the imaginal world in order to reach a dimension where there is no more image nor imagination, no more matter nor form, no more subject not object: the world of Osiris.

This dimension can be experienced by the intellectual intuition (*noesis*), which has to be considered as a supra-rational kind of knowledge. It is an immediate comprehension, that transmutes and reshapes the entire subject. It leads to a state of consciousness where there is no more distinction between subject and object. Nevertheless, one is not simply out of his/her mind, but, on the contrary, simultaneously aware and impersonal. The intellectual intuition, which is also called by Zolla

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<sup>169</sup> E. Zolla, *The poet as a myth-maker and shaman*, cit., pp. 426, 429. Regarding the relation between poetry and a different kind of conceiving imagination, see also: E. Zolla, *Yeats’s esoteric method*, in: C. De Pretis (a cura di), *Yeats oggi. Studi e ricerche*, Roma 1993, pp. 14-21.

<sup>170</sup> For the different meanings of contemplation, see E. Zolla, *The meaning of Tradition*, cit., p. 148: «in our everyday usage, to contemplate means to gaze joyfully at something. But as Tradition in the highest sense is the handing down of a method of contemplation, contemplation in its mystic sense applies to the act of looking upon visible things as signs of what lies beyond them and causes them to be. Looking beyond them to their essence. Contemplation implies meditation and is as a rule preceded by it. But meditation ponders over things, whereas contemplation grasps them directly. Patient meditation may lead up to contemplation, which takes place in a suspension of the ordinary consciousness of time».

<sup>171</sup> See E. Zolla, *Verità segrete esposte in evidenza*, cit., p. 441. See Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, 77, 382 C-D.

“metaphysical experience”<sup>172</sup>, is not irrational in the sense of a confused, sentimental feeling, it is not a way of giving up on rationality; on the contrary, it is the only ground on which rationality, emotions and sensations can flourish without becoming a prison<sup>173</sup>:

su tutto ciò che entra nel mondo dei nomi e delle forme, un nome è inflitto, una forma viene imposta, ma se l’orecchio interiore presta ascolto alla melodia segreta, alla pura musicalità dell’essere, si è liberi interiormente, quali che siano le maschere sociali via via indossate<sup>174</sup>.

The “personal mask” and the “I illusion” are not removed, but relativized; body, soul and reason are not denied but recognised in their own nature: their finitude doesn’t mean a devaluation; on the contrary, it opens up to the possibility of really enjoying them without being trapped in them. One doesn’t need any more to be identified with one part of himself/herself in order to be recognised, in order to find a meaning in his/her life. One can just become receptive to the music of being<sup>175</sup>, i.e.: one can disarm, stop struggling for recognition, because there is no more a “who” separate from another “who”, there is no more distinction even between “who” and “what”, but only a naked presence:

presenza di chi? A che cosa? Questi interrogativi, a questo punto, significano poco. Di chi? Una nuda presenza non è un ente trincerato in se stesso, nella sua separatezza: è tutti e nessuno. A chi? A un’altra nuda presenza, che la specchia e ne è specchiata, e che è la totalità dell’essere, il cui corpo è l’universo, la cui creazione è la natura. C’è un punto nell’esperienza metafisica in cui questa persona ineffabile che è tutto, diventa un neutro né maschile né femminile. C’è un punto ancora ulteriore in cui diventa lo zero, quando la trinità, che è l’unità di conoscitore, conosciuto e conoscenza, è stretta in un amore così assoluto che in essa cessa ogni distinzione<sup>176</sup>.

From the standpoint of the naked presence, i. e. from the standpoint of the metaphysical experience, there is no more distinction, there is pure identity; a subject that is identified with nature itself, a subject that is the Absolute, is naked and, at the same time, “full of being”: the subject is naked

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<sup>172</sup> See, for the definition of metaphysical experience, E. Zolla, *Archetipi*, cit., p. 35: «quando la psiche che percepisce e le cose percepite, soggetto e oggetto, si fondono e assorbono a vicenda, avviene ciò che si può definire esperienza metafisica».

<sup>173</sup> See E. Zolla, *Le potenze dell’anima*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>174</sup> E. Zolla, *Archetipi*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>175</sup> See, for the importance, in Zolla’s thought, of the musical metaphor, A. Colimberti, *L’acusticità nel pensiero di Elémire Zolla*, in: H. A. Cavallera (a cura di), *Eventi e studi. Scritti in onore di Hervé A. Cavallera*, Vol. II, Pensa Multimedia Editore, Lecce 2017, pp. 255-266;

<sup>176</sup> Ivi, p. 48.

because he/she can't be called with any name, but he/she is present, in the sense that everything is the subject himself/herself.

#### d) Mysticism

Mysticism, in Zolla's perspective, can be understood, in the first place, as the awakening of imagination and intellectual intuition, the awakening of human being from the dogmatic slumber of modern rationality and from the day-dreaming fancy.

It is, in the second place, a mundification<sup>177</sup>, i. e.: a recreation of the world that, arising from the dismissal of all personal illusions, provides a new way of looking at reality.

It is, in one word, the abandonment of the "I", that leads to a revitalizing of all human faculties:

l'abbandono dell'io non significa semplicisticamente abbandono dell'egoismo, ma soprattutto distensione delle proprie forze, scioglimento della contrazione forzata che costringe nei limiti di se stessi<sup>178</sup>.

Therefore, mysticism can't be reduced to the mystical-metaphysical experience, even though this kind of experience is at its core. It can rather be understood as a synonym of "spirit", interpreted in the broader sense analysed in the second paragraph. Mysticism represents a way of being-in-the-world at the exact opposite of modern perspective. This does not mean that mysticism is reactionary, but that it gives the opportunity to look at oneself and at the world from a different standpoint.

In other words, mysticism can be seen as that kind of standpoint on life which contains and exceeds all the other ones: the mystical world is, from the standpoint of finitude, a symbolical world, whereas from the standpoint of the Absolute is the absolute identity itself. In this sense, everything finite is a symbol of the infinite, which, by exceeding every finite, denies it and makes it real.

To live in a mystical world means to be at the same time an individual and the universal reality, since everything, including individuality, is a symbol of universality, is a symbol of the infinite all-one, which expresses itself in the manifold and indefinite world of finitude<sup>179</sup>.

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<sup>177</sup> E. Zolla, *Introduzione*, in: E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell'Occidente*, vol. 1, cit., p. 26

<sup>178</sup> E. Zolla, *L'io*, in: A. Moravia, E. Zolla (eds.), *I moralisti moderni*, cit., p. 51

<sup>179</sup> See E. Zolla, *Introduzione*, in: E. Zolla (a cura di), *I mistici dell'Occidente*, vol. 1, cit., p. 89: «il nucleo inconfondibile, irripetibile dell'individuo è insieme il divino in lui, il suo destino specifico è anche il suo contatto con l'universale, in cui il massimo e il minimo si convertono l'uno nell'altro perché sono un'unità, entrambi».

A good example, which may be useful in understanding what Zolla means when he claims that mysticism must be seen as the normal and normative condition of the human being, can be the following:

il pittore non ravvisa gli oggetti dinanzi ai quali si pone, scorge soltanto rapporti esatti fra questa o quella forma, fra questa e quella intensità luminosa. Dall'annullamento degli oggetti: operazione mercuriale, emerge, grazie all'esattezza dei rapporti, il mondo degli oggetti, carico di senso, rinato [...] egli [l'uomo santificato, cioè l'uomo mistico] a ogni aurora si nega al creato per esserci e non per averlo; muore al mondo per trovarsi a casa nel mondo (opera un'*epoché* per cogliere le essenze, dà corso alla dialettica per distruggere le pietrificazioni)<sup>180</sup>.

The example of the painter, that destroys reality in order to recreate it with every stroke, might be a good image of the mystic as the normal and spontaneous human being. The normal subject would be, in this sense, a self-forgetful subject, a subject that dies and rebirths at every moment. Therefore, spontaneity means to act as if one weren't oneself, it means to not split volition from action, it means to recreate the entire world, including the subject, at every moment.

It is the supreme norm because it dictates that there must not be any dictate, because it shows that every attempt to follow a rule, be it ethical or epistemological, may become a prison rather than a tool. This doesn't mean that there is no rule, but that knowing the rule means to know its relativity and therefore to be able to be free, in the rule, from the rule itself.

This idea of mystic subjectivity may be an important alternative to the common one, since it is released from the dialectic between the rule and its infringement, since it is not any more a moralistic subjectivity, but a metaphysical one, i. e.: a subjectivity that feels, thinks, acts in light of the Absolute.

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<sup>180</sup> E. Zolla, *Volgarità e dolore*, cit., p. 287.

## Conclusion

The brief overview on Zolla's work was meant to show the complexity of his thought, but, at the same time, its inner coherence.

The analysis led in the three chapters has outlined that the most relevant aspect of Zolla's intellectual production can be summarised as following: it is certainly true that his theoretical and hermeneutical tools come from the Frankfurt School and, more generally, from the European and Italian reception of the Hegelian philosophy; however, this starting point is enriched by the connection between critical theory and mystic tradition, which brings Zolla to develop a kind of thought that, without being reactionary, tries to reshape some modern paradigms.

Zolla's ethical and metaphysical proposal appears to be more akin to a pre-modern idea of philosophy or, speaking in terms of space, it appears to be more similar to the idea of philosophy that one may find in some other traditions, such as the Hindu one. The reason for this lies in the strong relationship, in Zolla's works, between the dimensions of thought and life.

In Greece, but also, up to a certain point, in Medieval philosophy, no thought would have been meaningful, if it hadn't been embodied in a way of life, whereas nowadays few scholars would say that their work directly affects their life, that what they study and write is directly reflected in the way they behave; for instance, when a scholar has to write an article about Plato, the question if Plato was right or not, if Plato said something true or not, is seen as irrelevant or, even worse, as naïve: there is no need to know if Plato was right or not, there is no place for a true dialogue between the scholar and the author analysed; there is only place for a discussion about the different interpretations of Plato's philosophy, in order to propose, at the end of the research, another – meaningless - new interpretation.

In this respect, Zolla's production, although the author was a scholar and a university professor, seems to be out of his time, seems to recall a way of conceiving culture far away from what we usually understand under this notion. His entire production, with its particular style, with its contents, with its structure, is an indictment of the meaninglessness of great part of modernity. Anyway, style, contents and structure of Zolla's works are also an example of a different approach to culture and, more generally, to life as a whole. He shows, through the medium of writing, that it is possible to live more fully, that there are infinite shades in the world and that these shades are worth being experienced; he shows that the world we are used to is not the only possible, that there is a kind of joy that exceeds any other finite happiness, that there is a truth that exceed the realm of reason, the realm of time and space, that this truth involves the entire subjective dimension, until any barrier between the subject and the object is broken.

The critique of modernity is therefore the first step in the rediscovery of this idea of subjectivity, that tries to think and to experience the paradox of an impersonality which is not depersonalised. The analysis of the categories of “I” and “person” is aimed at deconstructing these ideas, in order to show that they have no substantial meaning, but only a (distorted) relational one: my “I” is due to a distorted relationship with time, that, by means of memory, deceive me, making me believe that I am the result of the experiences I have had; my “person” is due to a distorted relationship with the others, with the cultural space; this distorted relationship makes me believe that “who I am” is “what society recognizes in me”.

On the contrary, the concepts of “attention”, “spirit”, “imagination”, “intellectual intuition”, “metaphysical experience”, “mysticism”, try to catch the inner meaning of an experience that exceeds space and time, that exceeds my personal history, my birth and my death, my job, my thoughts and my feelings. This experience affects at the same time the ethical and the theoretical sphere. It leads to a complete transfiguration both of the subjective and of the objective reality and helps to rethink what to be human might mean.

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