EITHER/ OR, AND BEYOND[1]

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Abstract:
Reality and fiction build a binary which shared the fate of dualist thinking in general in the postmodernist age, dominated by deconstruction. The climactic point was probably reached by the fabrication of lens which magnify reality. The fabrication of virtual reality lens was meant to augment reality, virtual reality meaning less or a deformed reality show. Science and technology have thus reified the philosophical battle over positivist taxonomies and classifications that first came under the philosophical onslaught of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. The "either/ or" dichotomy of the former ended up in the latter's "beyond", which, in quantum language, is a superposition of opposite states. Although the bulk of fantasy and science-fiction still capitalizes on the distinct ontologies of reality and fiction, the literature of late modernity (modernism and postmodernism) speculated on an ontological hybrid bridging the ontological gap between the two of them. Such are the modernist novel, "Isabel and the Devil's Waters" by Mircea Eliade, and the postmodernist story, "Schrödinger's Cat," by Ursula K. Le Guin read in the key of an ontological poetics in the present paper.
Keywords: deconstruction; binaries; superposition of states; ontological poetics; Mircea Eliade; Ursula K. Le Guin.

"Either reality or fiction" sounds like an option, like

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[2] https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=55375717500

the forking of quantum states in multiverse theory, or, as modal logic says, one world existing to the exclusion of all the others. The passage from one world to the other would then appear like a jump rather than a step, maybe a fatal one.

Søren Kierkegaard' smoothing over this disjunction in his first book, *Either/Or,* brings him close to us, living in postmodernity, whose spirit – defined by anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism, and anti-dualism - was ushered in by existentialism, Nietzschean and Heideggerian deconstructionism and polyvalent logic. If we turn to the founding father, Kierkegaard, we can read in his essay *Either/Or* (an opposition which he dismisses) a superposition of the real and the imaginary – a border zone, instead of a polarity:

> If I imagined two kingdoms bordering each other, one of which I knew rather well and the other not at all, and if however much I desired it I were not allowed to enter the unknown kingdom, I would still be able to form some idea of it. I would go to the border of the kingdom known to me and follow it all the way, and in doing so I would by my movements describe the outline of that unknown land and thus have a general idea of it, although I had never set foot in it. (Kierkegaard, 1987).

Published under the disjunctive *Either/Or* title, Kierkegaard's 1843 book was laying out the design of his philosophy as one obsessing with the impossibility or the irrelevance of choice: shall one grow the aesthetic, autonomous self, or the dutiful, moral self? Shall one marry or not marry? Either way, he says, the one who makes the choice will regret. We can imagine the impression of novelty made by Kierkegaard on his contemporaries, yet he goes on to say that his "ecstatic lecture" is flawless:

> My wisdom is easy to grasp, for I have only one
> maxim, and even that is not a point of departure for
> me. One must differentiate between the subsequent
> dialectic in either/or and the eternal one suggested
> here. So when I say that my maxim is not a point of
> departure for me, this does not have the opposite of
> being a point of departure but is merely the
> negative expression of my maxim, that by which it
> comprehends itself in contrast to being a point of
> departure or not being a point of departure.
> (Kierkegaard, 1987)

Kierkegaard's position in "An ecstatic lecture"
(Either/Or) is similar to Derrida's definition of the
signifier, reduced to a trace containing a signified and its
opposite in relation to which it makes sense (A and non-A,
hot and cold etc.):

> [...] l'ordre du signifié n'est jamais contemporain,
> est au mieux l'envers ou le parallèle subtilement
> décalé — le temps d'un souffle — de l'ordre du
> signifiant. Et le signe doit être l'unité d'une
> hétérogénéité, puisque le signifié (sens ou chose,
> noème ou réalité) n'est pas en soi un signifiant,
> une trace : en tout cas n'est pas constitué dans son
> sens par son rapport à la trace possible. (Derrida,
> 1967: 31) [...] La trace, où se marque le rapport à
> l'autre (Derrida, 1967: 69)[3].

It is only this "ecstatic position", outside the system,
that allows the contemplation of the system's possible

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[3] [...] the order of the signified is never contemporary, is at best the reverse or the
subtly delayed – the time of a breath – parallel from the order of the signifier. And
the sign must be the unity of a heterogeneity, since the signified (sense or thing,
noeme or reality) is not in itself a signifier, a trace. [...] The trace where the rapport
to the other is marked. (translation mine – M.-A. T)

states, all of which, according to quantum theorists of the wave function, can be realized in time. A move from reality, from status quo, to probability/ possibility could thus accommodate contrary and successive, in real time, Eigenstates, which Einstein's relativity theory of the impossibility of standing outside the system one is observing had prohibited.

With Nietzsche (*Beyond Good and Evil,* 1886), such binaries vaporize in the indecisiveness of the *beyond* (good or evil, or any other discriminating polarity). Little did probably people expect such speculations smoothing over extremes, levelling down differences, to encroach upon the precise, rule-governed field of the exact sciences in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the either/or disjunction, which had characterized the logic of identity, disappeared under new concepts, such as relativity, uncertainty, or the superposition of states.

Whereas the fantasy of the previous ages had played upon the unpassable threshold between the real and the unreal – with stepping over it as the primary scene of inroads into other worlds – the fiction of the last century, whether of the magic realist, psychedelic, existentialist, dystopian, SF, meta-fabulatory, expressionist, speculative, etc. school, generates a fictional space which might be characterized by one of Ursula K. Le Guin's titles to a collection of short stories: *The Real AND the Unreal* (2012) (our emphasis).

The present paper addresses two types of scripts in which the boundary between real and unreal becomes blurred.

One of them was created by Mircea Eliade in his novel, *Isabel and the Devil's Waters* (1930). The influence of Kierkegaard's book, *Either/Or,* is so obvious that the novel was declared a doctrinaire and thesist one. The existentialist choice between aesthetic and moral self keeps

the contraries apart, the narrator progressing from the former to the latter as in his philosophical source. Nevertheless, there is also an intrusion of the unreal, the novel having two ends. In one of them, the narrator marries Isabel living a common life in an arcadian space. In the other, he marries Isabel who is pregnant with another man's child. Which story is the true one? There is a realist explanation, that of the narrator having been afflicted with malaria and having passed the whole summer in a state of delirium, yet certain elements of the plot in the new epic trajectory confirm de reality of the summer course of life. The ambiguity is never totally removed. Eliade's vacillation between the two worlds is partly an extension of his philosophy of the mix of the sacred and the profane, and partly an anticipation of the postmodern idea about the reality effect of language, so that writing in different generic forms (his novel, *Maitreyi*, for instance, as diary and as fiction) generates different worlds.

The postmodern script of parallel plots (Fig. 1) is generally based upon the physicists' speculations about the existence of multiple worlds (multiverse, wave function) or the superposition of ontologically distinct realities. Ursula K. Le Guin even entitles one of her stories, "Schrödinger's Cat", alluding to the Austrian Nobel Award winner's famous thought experiment.

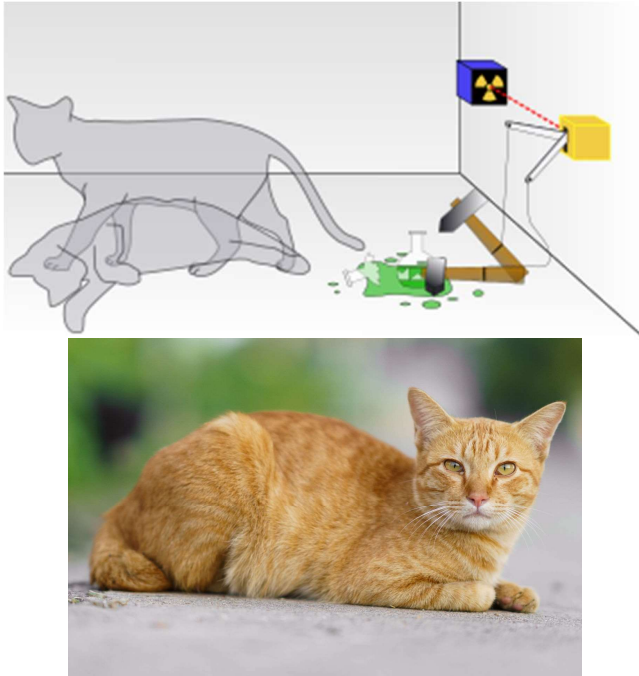Fig. 1. The universal; wavefunction forking into parallel worlds.

Fig. 2: Schrödinger's Cat: the thought experiment and a real
counterpart.

The narrator in Le Guin's story is fleeing the city
world where temperature is continually increasing. The
thermic death of the universe – entropy – has come upon
humankind, and on her way to her refuge, the narrator comes
upon a discomfiting picture of a married couple coming
apart, disintegrating into the New Physics' particle world
(Fig. 3). The juxtaposition of posthuman, inorganic show,
and all too human illusions about a love bond is shocking:

> She had pretty well gone to pieces, but he seemed,
> at first glance, quite hearty […] The left leg, the
> arms, and the trunk, which had remained lying in
> the heap, twitched and jerked in sympathy. "Great

legs," the husband pointed out, looking at the slim ankle. "My wife has great legs." (Le Guin, 1982).

Fig. 3: Disintegration from human to cloud of particles

The narrator's ecstatic position is not within nature but within a sea of signs. She earns herself a new life in a semiotic space, not safe from outward intrusions; narrating she becomes narrator (something in the way of "Mourning Becomes Electra").

She lives now in a border zone with the real and the semiotic entering a new polarity. A real cat steals into her home, described in physical details, in the manner of realist portrayal or scientific observation: It is only that, with the disappearance of the reality plane, there is no possibility for checking the truth about her:

A cat has arrived, interrupting my narrative. It is a striped yellow tom with white chest and paws. He has long whiskers and yellow eyes. I never noticed before that cats had whiskers above their eyes; is that normal? There is no way to tell. (Le Guin, 1982).

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The same juxtaposition of opposites, as in the couple scene, aligns here a real cat washing sardine oil off its whiskers and a copy of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* on which she is taking a rest (Fig. 4).
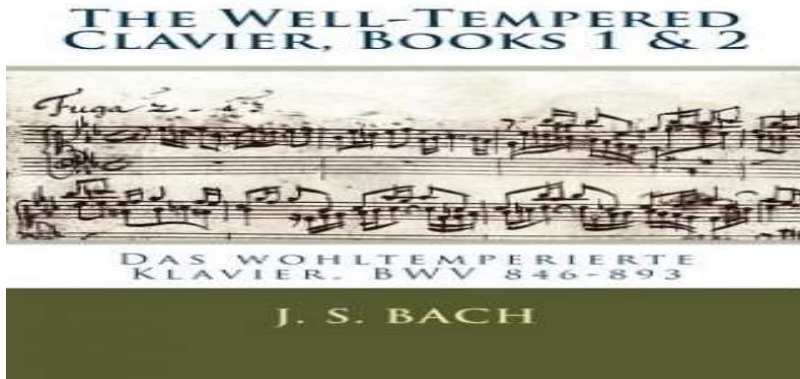

Fig. 4: J.S. Bach, *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (score)

The scene changes rapidly, as if the narrator were exiting into a surreal world where beings receive an identity through what they are doing (The existentialists' idea that existence precedes essence). The narrator draws the conclusion that the creature coming in is a dog because of the sounds it produces which resemble barking. The relationship between reality and perception is turned on its head: *Dieu, en regardant par la fenêtre, fait la maison*. But where is God situated? On which side of the window? Is the house/ universe an organic outgrowth of His body or is it His making? Is He inorganic origin or architect? Is the universe a material *res extensa* or the dream/ fiction of some divine intelligence?

The ontologically ambiguous figure which has intruded into the country home mixes up ontological levels: he is convinced that the cat lying on *The Well-*

Tempered Clavier sheet music is the cat in Schrödinger's mental experiment of quantic entanglement: as long as the vial of cyanide inside the box wherein the cat is imprisoned is not broken, the cat stays alive, but an outside observer will only find out about that on opening the box. Whereas Rover (the incognito guest) misquotes Einstein saying that God plays dice with the world, the narrator is Einstein's disciple: "But why does opening the box and looking reduce the system back to one probability, either live cat or dead cat? Why don't we get included in the system when we lift the lid of the box?"

Illogically but significantly on the symbolic plane, on raising the lid, the cat is not inside. Reality's place is not within a scientific experiment. However, the roof of the house is lifted so that the narrator and Rover can get a glimpse of the stars and of the infinite universe. The narrator can hear "the note A, the one that drove the composer Schumann mad. It is a beautiful, clear tone, much clearer now that the stars are visible." What new birth out of music is the narrator witnessing? It is not Pythagoras's music of the spheres; it is not the physicists' vibrating strings/ chords, it is the sound of an art object. Schumann read a book of cryptography in his youth and later in life showed himself interested in "veiled allusions symbolism and mystery" (Sams 1966: web). He created a musical cipher wheel, one of his combination of signs corresponding to his beloved's name (Clara – the clear, A note repeated).

Fig. 4: Schumann's Clara cipher

If Plato, following Pythagoras, imagined a musical

scale of the universe made up of tetrads, so did Schumann obsess with a natural minor *scale* using the *white* piano keys, up and down, A to A –Le Guin's "white, clear tone." (Sams, 1966: web).

Whereas postmodernist Ursula Le Guin makes *coincidentia oppositorum* possible in the reified spirit of artefacts, modernist Mircea Eliade, the celebrated historian of religions, wrote his *Isabel and the Devil's Water* in Kierkegaard's existentialist key.

The novel is an existentialist ontology of the self. The narrator starts his life anew in India, forgetting everything about his past, his youth, his former family in the country left behind, even that country's language. His model is Kierkegaard's *Either/Or,* he experiencing in turn the either of not marrying, of seeking sexual pleasure like Kierkegaard's Don Juan, who is not a sensualist but a seeker of love as an absolute. He wants to become a scholar, write books, spend his life in a museum world of art.

He realizes that the young woman with whom he is platonically involved is a common creature without any spiritual calling:

> She sat down on the other side of the piano. She didn't thank me for *Die Abwesenheit,* but asked me to try a new notebook of jazz and romance, borrowed from cousin Iulia. In that moment I understood that I lived in two worlds. (Eliade, 1930).

The composition he plays on the piano is a pun on being absent, on his loneliness in her company. Nevertheless, precisely because he does not live his own life but one written in advance by Kierkegaard, he chooses the "or" of marriage, taking Isabel to Labong and living there a pastoral romance, with himself as dilligent farmer and father assuming the responsibilities of his children's education in

England. He had lived exclusively for his self, an aesthete's life, as defined by Kierkegaard, and now he makes up for that time of his life through an aesthete's apostasies.

However, running into his former upper class and scholarly company one day, he is told that he had been seen in Darjeeling? the last summer. Had then his Labong pastoral experience been only in his imagination? He loses his grip on reality:

> The circle narrowed around me. Acute fear ran through me. I grabbed the consul's and Miss. Roth's arm. - You will forgive me, I will tell you the reason another time. But please, what year are we in now? Am I old or young? Is Isabel my wife? (Eliade, 1930).

The narrator is seeking confirmation of his recent life in what psychologist Ludwig Biswanger, mentioned in the novel, recommended in cases of crisis of identity: intersubjectivity as test of reality. It seemed that Labong had been pure hallucination induced by malaria. At the same time, his company are heavy opium addicts, so they too could be mistaken. Moreover, the death of an acquaintance, Catherine Irving, which happens exactly as in his summer dream, increases his sense of ontic ambiguity generated by events which partake of the two, mutually exclusive, experiences in his mind:

> A week before Christmas, there was something that left me speechless: the death of Catherine Irving. She died in a few days, of malaria. She died as I had dreamed in my summer dream. The news scared me. [...] From the first day, the obsession of the nightmare possessed me. Now I was really obsessed, because the dream was gone, I had lived for a long time without the memory of it, and suddenly

> someone behind me was chasing me, nagging me, grabbing my shoulder, pushing my body, entwining my steps. Now the dream stretched tentacularly into my own destiny, into the freshness of my life, into the freedom of the soul. (Eliade, 1930).

The imaginary and the real cross paths again in his decision to marry Isabel, pregnant with some other man's baby, who dies in childbirth without having ever consummated her marriage out of a sense of guilt. The narrator sees the baby of the woman he had not touched as a sort of Saviour, "born of a virgin." This Kierkegaardian victory of faith and interiority is also the enactment of a myth: *coincidentia oppositorum*, the suspension of binary thinking, the only non-contradictory fusion of being and meaning, of world and representation, of Arcadia and Museion.

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