

## Mysticism and subjectivity in Elémire Zolla's thought

Sebastian Schwibach (Lumsa, Roma – UCP, Lisboa)

### Introduction

In this paper, I would like to analyse mysticism as a different way of conceiving the human being. In this regard, Elémire Zolla's thought can provide an interesting perspective, since the question that underlies his entire production can be summarized in these two points: why did the modern subject turn into a massified, broken, alienated subject? Is it possible to think a way out of this condition and, if so, is it a path which necessarily leads out of the modern society?

These two points lead to a more specific one: what could it mean to be a healthy subject, if personal health, i. e. integrity, collides with the social structure, which needs unaware men and women to perpetuate its functioning model?

I would like to explore these issues, which in my understanding are not irrelevant for an integral human development.

In this respect, I would firstly like to provide the general framework of Zolla's intellectual production.

I will especially focus my attention on his critique of modern society.

Secondly, I will analyse Zolla's understanding of the notion of "spirit" and I will especially focus on the role of intellectual intuition and imagination as two faculties that may enable modern subjectivity to overcome its narrowness.

I will eventually contextualize mystic experience into 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.

### Critique of modern subjectivity: the triangular prison

As we will see below, modern subjectivity is characterized, in Zolla's opinion, by the oblivion of two important faculties: imagination and intellect. The former is often confused with fancy, as well as the second one is usually identified with reason.

This oblivion and misunderstanding is, ultimately, the anthropological ground on which 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.

In an anthology of Sade's writings edited in 1961<sup>1</sup>, Zolla, referring to Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, states that the identification of the human being with reason has been one

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Zolla, *Foreword*, in: D. De Sade, *Le Opere*, ed. by E. Zolla, Longanesi, Milano 1961, pp. 48-57.

of the most relevant causes for the disruption of mankind itself, as it has converted each and every subject into an object.

Enlightenment is, in this respect, the first movement that leads to massification, i. e. to depersonalisation, 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. This can be especially displayed through Sade's literary works, since they are, both for the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and for Zolla, the best example of a coherent development of the modern-enlightened category of reason. In Sade

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>2</sup>.

Modern reason appears to be, in Zolla's early writings, the most important element in the decline of Western culture, since it is a dehumanised reason that turns both humanity and the natural world into objects, into tools that have no other purpose than to function.

However, this assumption must be better analysed, put into perspective and relativized, in order not to misunderstand or simplify Zolla's thought. It is not a matter of getting rid of 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 to focus 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" appears to be 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 and therefore it is likely to become a new ideology. Since it stands against the old ideology, the new one perpetuates the same inner mechanism and leads to an equivalent kind of submission.

Secondly, it is not a matter of choosing among thoughts, emotions or sensations, among rationalism, romanticism or materialism, among reason, soul or body<sup>3</sup>. The problem doesn't lie in the chosen

---

<sup>2</sup> Ivi, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> These terms can be used as synonyms, since, as we will see below, reason, soul-emotion and body-sensation are the only aspects that, in Zolla's view, western societies and cultures recognise. See: E. Zolla (1968), *Le potenze dell'anima*, BUR, Milano 2008, pp. 19-21.

object, but in the process that leads to a choice which is, in fact, an identification. In this kind of process, both the subject and the object lose their complexity and stratification and are submitted to a unidirectional perspective, which becomes “*what I am*”.

Moreover, both from a cultural perspective and from an anthropological one, it is possible to notice that one ideology attracts the other as its opposite in a never ending circle.

This circle is analysed by Zolla in *Le potenze dell'anima* (1968), where reason, soul-emotion and body are considered the vertices of the triangular prison where modern subject is confined.

Modern subjects recognise themselves in 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. They are machines, 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>4</sup>.

This modern subject, this mass-man that doesn't know anything beyond calculation, efficiency and abstract sentimentalism; this completely alienated automaton lives under the illusion that the triangle is what and who he/she really is. Body, soul and reason are, in this regard, the three components of his/her “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>5</sup> in Western culture and many different Eastern philosophies<sup>6</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>7</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,

---

<sup>4</sup> E. Zolla, *Foreword*, cit., p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> See E. Zolla (1996), *La nube del telaio. Ragione e irrazionalità tra Oriente e Occidente*, in: G. Marchianò (ed.), *Filosofia perenne e mente naturale*, Omnia, Marsilio, Venezia 2013, pp. 25-110, 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<sup>rd</sup> October, 1948.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, E. Zolla (1993), *Gli estremi da evitare: la lezione buddhista*, in: E. Zolla, *Gli arcani del potere. Elzeviri 1960-2000*, ed. by G. Marchianò, Bur, Milano 2009, pp. 199-201.

<sup>7</sup> E. Zolla (1994), *Lo stupore infantile*, ed. by G. Marchianò, Omnia, Marsilio, Venezia 2014, p. 33.

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 arose in Zolla's youth and became more and more complex as he started 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 Dowdal in «The Times Literary Supplement» of 1948<sup>8</sup>.

Dowdal 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>9</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>10</sup>

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>11</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 structure in which I recognise myself; it is namely a projection and a solidification of my past, as 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. This ambiguity doesn't result from

---

<sup>8</sup> See G. Marchianò, *Elémire Zolla. Il conoscitore di segreti. Una biografia intellettuale*, Rizzoli, Milano 2006, pp. 45-46.

<sup>9</sup> H. C. Dowdall, *The word "person"*, in: «The Times Literary Supplement», 8<sup>th</sup> may, 1948.

<sup>10</sup> E. Zolla, *The word "person"*, cit., p. 597.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

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.

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 result from a kind of splitting, a kind of double-dealing with oneself, that is at the heart of the modern misunderstanding of subjectivity.

If the identification with body, soul and reason is the prison in which the modern subject is captured, fancy, as the faculty of day-dreaming, is the guardian. Fancy means to be doubled, to be oneself for the other self that lives in a day-dream<sup>12</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 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, success; full of hidden envy toward 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>13</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.

---

<sup>12</sup> E. Zolla (1964), *Storia del fantasticare*, in: G. Marchianò (ed.), *Il serpente di bronzo. Scritti antesignani di critica sociale, Omnia*, Marsilio, Venezia 2015, pp. 315-532, p. 334.

<sup>13</sup> E. Zolla (1978), *The uses of imagination and the decline of the West*, Airez, Montepulciano, 2010, p. 27.

It is the opposite of attention, 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>14</sup>.

The modern construction of the idea of subjectivity is, in Zolla's opinion, 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.

The reduction of the subject as a whole to one single part 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.

All these ideologies are not able to provide a universal idea of the human being, nor to explain reality as a whole, because they focus on a particular element that tacitly implies its own exceeding.

It's however 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.

### Spirit, imagination and intellectual intuition

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. 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>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> E. Zolla, *La nube del telaio*, cit., p. 110.

<sup>15</sup> E. Zolla (1971), *Che cos'è la tradizione*, Adelphi, Milano, 2011, p. 126.

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, i. e. where the subject may be imprisoned in his/her own dream or may be opened up to spirit, i. e. to the bridge-dimension between interiority and exteriority.

“Spirit” means a super-human dimension, i. e. a dimension that can’t be constrained into a mere subjective perspective. It is the place where inside and outside communicate, it is a non-dimensional dimension, where subject and object lose their boundaries. If what is finite in 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. The kind of joy that Zolla is referring to is not anymore personal, has nothing to do with social recognition or self-sense, but emerges from a different way of being-in-the-world.

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 dimension can be experienced by the intellectual intuition, which has to be considered as a supra-rational kind of knowledge. It is an immediate comprehension, that transmutes and reshapes the entire subject, because 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 “metaphysical experience”, 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.

This kind of knowledge has been neglected, since a new model of reality arose, a model that in Zolla’s view has its prototype in Descartes’ philosophy, where the entire world is reduced to the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*.

Around this time, an equally important misunderstanding or oblivion took place: 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. In ancient Greek and Medieval tradition, as well as, for example, in Sufi tradition and in some Persian philosophical schools, the distinction between fancy and imagination was clear: while the first one locks the subject in a prison

of images and emotions that precludes any possible contact with reality, the second one raises man/woman above himself/herself and enables him/her to get in touch with a world of images that symbolizes the archetypal world and that makes sense of the material world as well.

The loss 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.

## 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>16</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>17</sup>.

Therefore, mysticism can't be reduced to the mystical experience, even though this kind of experience is at its core. 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 Zolla's opinion, by rehabilitating imagination and intellectual intuition it is possible to identify the specific feature of a mystic life, which can be useful as a term of comparison not only for society and individuals, but also for the idea of nature as a whole.

---

<sup>16</sup> E. Zolla, Introduction to: E. Zolla (ed.), *I mistici dell'Occidente*, vol. 1, Adelphi, Milano 2010, pp. 19-104, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> E. Zolla, A. Moravia (eds.), *I moralisti moderni*, Garzanti, Milano 1960, p. 51.