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Social Network, Performative Language, and Platonic Problems. About Creativity in the Virtual World

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Abstract: The article tackles the relationship between the way we represent ourselves in the social network and the old Platonic problem of representation, as it was highlighted in Mihnea Măruță's book, *Virtual Identity. Why and How are We Transformed by the Social Media*, 2023. Drawing on the idea that the seduction of the social network comes from the illusion of centrality and power, the book equally reiterates the threat of freedom it involves. Pondering on arguments highlighted by Horea Poenar and Érik Bordeleau in a dialogue published in the volume *Inflexiuni*, 2022, as well as on the symbolic fault lines explored by writers such as Nancy Huston, Ingeborg Bachmann, and Elena Ferrante, the article proves that the creative multi-layers of natural languages, involving "untranslatable" resources for truth, care, and justice, should not be leveled down to the translational achievements of a powerful engine. Moreover, the "perforating language" invoked by Achille Mbembe, which is meant to create a "terrestrial community," should be able to express the scale of infinite probabilities on which information is performed nowadays, in a more creative way.

Keywords: social network, virtual identity, Platonic theory of representation, translation, terrestrial community, information, natural languages, creativity.

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1. Why the way we represent ourselves in the social network is an old Platonic problem?

Beyond significant insights related to the paradigm changes implicit in the creation of new virtual identities, Mihnea Măruță's book on *Virtual Identity. Why and How are We Transformed by the Social Media* (published in a multimedia version) raises at least two fundamental questions regarding the status of representation in the Western World and its transformation during the last two decades. On the one hand, the first question locates this "switch" within the virtualization of the self-image, through which the entire Western paradigm of representation (drawn by Plato in the regime of the simulacrum that refers to reality in itself), is transmuted in the direction of a simulacrum that refers to itself, that self-eroticizes, self-loves, and self-seduces, eluding even the necessity of carnal presence. On the other hand, the second question addresses the problem of the self, debated since the Stoics, namely the construction of the inner freedom as introjection of a world made out of chaos.

Related to these fundamental questions, the problem of freedom remains essential, since the temptation to give it up in exchange for an enlarged, infinite, but perfectly manipulable and controllable world, is in fact the main temptation of our times. This is how the book ends:

"This will be the great dilemma in the world of tomorrow: should I embrace the fascinating experience in which the border between the real and the virtual disappears, that is, to access a reality in which I see, learn and live more than I would see, learn and live naturally, or should I settle for *this* reality, stay with just my body, unenhanced, un-technological, but still under the power of my will?" (Măruță 281)

The dilemma seems to leave no middle ground: it is played out between being in control of one's own mind and being owned and captured by a network in which a ghostly self, a self-simulacrum, is created; a simulacrum which promises something that human being has been searching for since the beginning of her life on earth and which, at the moment, seems tangible. Beyond the fascination that the virtual self generates, namely a form of detachment from the carnal being, there must be in it something more archaic, by virtue of which the transfer of vital substance is capable of seducing humanity. The author proves that this archaic element exists, putting to the test the arsenal of philosophy, but also intuitions of writers or filmmakers, which give weight to his philosophical reflections.

The fascination of the virtual self stems from the desire of every human being to "immortalize" herself, to persist, beyond the inconsistency of earthly life. What does this have to do with people obsessively posting pictures of dogs, cats, trips to exotic islands, or illusory happiness? Journalists, celebrities, ordinary people, NGOs, animal lovers, they all produce self-effusive images that slowly detach from their concrete reality.

In this context, the question we will address is the following: what is there so different today compared to the way humans reflected the world since immemorial times? In the opening passage of the book, the author announces: “For the first time in his history, man has the opportunity to record his passage through this world publicly and continuously: social networks are at his disposal as a diary, as a stage and as a virtual tombstone” (Măruță 21). This privilege, which used to be the prerogative of story-makers, the exception, becomes now the possibility of every living being, who can perpetuate her story, her preferences, her enhanced self-image, down to the slightest detail. This might seem exceptional, since being forgotten is our deepest fear. But the price paid for it is the spectrality, the enhancement of the everyday nothingness.

Moreover, through the creation of the virtual identity, our seemingly revealing self is also hidden, in the mass of interactions that navigate between the intentions of a given person and the interpretations of those intentions within a certain group. If the implicit purpose of public exposure, of creating a virtual by-product of our real self, is to improve its public image, the result can often be the exact opposite, increasing uncertainty in society and also self-uncertainty.

The project of this mysterious world created by social network is not new. It was anticipated as early as 1940 by the Argentine writer Adolfo Bioy Casares’s novel, *The Invention of Morel*, which stages virtual reality, fifty years before it became globalized: namely, the fact that a certain device is able to capture all the details of a person’s life and to emit three-dimensional holograms that will reconstruct what she experienced, with all the combinations of her thoughts and affects. “Life will therefore be a repository of death” (31), concludes Măruță, inducing the illusion of creating one’s own presence in the minds of others, even if they have never really known the person in question.

The crucial problem with this ghostly transition between the real and the virtual is that it causes an “ontological vertigo” (45), through a ghostly extension of the self, in which the passage is accomplished through “memory storage, mummification, immortalization, passage into an alternative world (or an afterlife), etc.” (44). This will of course occur for all of us one day, but in the case of the ontological illusion of the virtual self, it simply occurs in advance. The speed by which we metamorphosize into figures of death no longer allows us to live, to give substance to the lived reality. The author draws a parallel with the myth of Theuth from *Phaedrus*, in which the Egyptian equivalent of Hermes presents before the father of gods the advantages of writing, but the warning makes itself immediately heard: the moment memory will be stored by writing, the “first-rate” memory—the living, organic memory—will lose its functions and reflexes. The process could be paralleled to the way we live the illusion of the “enhanced” self, which in fact induces a living mummification, a ghostly extension—the specter most dreaded by Plato or the Stoics.

In this respect, I will briefly mention the Platonic polemic, extensively analyzed by the author, around the distinction made between image understood as *eikon* and image understood as *phántasma*. The latter does not imitate a model, but manifests itself as an art of its own (Măruță 71). We can play devil's advocate and agree with Nietzsche, as a diagnostician of the contemporary world, who puts emphasis on the domain of the simulacrum. Moreover, we also consider the author's journey alongside theories of important phenomenologists, such as Heidegger, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, which prove that these creations of illusion could acquire the consistency of world, of consciousness, and of carnality. The problem persists, however, on an ethical, but also on an aesthetic level, and it is noticed by the Stoics, who strove hardily to acquire what they called an *ethopoietic* (the art of becoming a better person, the operation of renewal by revealing the truth).

Compared to this, in the case of the social network, the *ethopoietic* is absent because ego-pumping becomes addictive. Our external memory, which we draw in the network, is intended for the others, with the aim of gaining visibility, but also of continuously simulating the exceptional: "If the Stoics, publicly, forced themselves to disguise qualities, we, in the network, strive to simulate qualities" (Măruță 66).

If social network is so present in our lives, it is because it molds an illusion of centrality, of being at the heart of reality that is almost equivalent to the nostalgia of paradise—being "in the carefree and pain-free core of true reality. (In networking, paradise is seen in the others)" (125). This web, as the author calls it, is that what makes it nearly impossible to break free from the illusion that others will grant us reality, immortality, persistence, or simply unshakable presence.

The flip side of the medal is just as dramatic, since, while leaving no traces in the network, the node-man, the one who inserts himself into the network, is constantly touched by the anxiety of non-existence. As long as it manifests, as long as it exists *online*, the virtual self is present. But when it dissipates, a pressing sensation of absence from one's own life sets in, as if the being were caught in the gap, waiting for further consummation (from this point of view, the analysis of Iñárritu's film *Birdman* is revealing for the global sensation of feeling that one is absent from one's own existence).

While we can still affirm that this extension, represented by the virtual self, comes from a nostalgia for centrality and an illusion of rebirth through others, deeply rooted in the human condition, as well as from a misguided eroticism, seduced by its own reflections, the paradigm shift towards virtualizing reality becomes worrisome when, in a metaverse made up of fictions, temptations will become infinite, hallmarks irrelevant, disruption increasingly acute, and the promises of ideologies overwhelming. We could articulate the dilemma as follows—i.e., either choose the seductive multitude of the network, which gives us the feeling of an enriched self, through representations such as the transcendence of space (direct access to others) and time (perpetually remaining in their consciences), or freedom (that is, to settle

for a non-technological self). The question we address persists: could this playful exercise of “riding the beast” involve a double game, of a critical spirit, outside and inside the networks? Or on the contrary, it simply assumes combating the evil of virtual nihilism through an irreducible return to reality? By folding into a self that breathes, thinks, is downright “idiot” (in Dostoyevsky’s sense) in asserting its needs—a self that is ready to accept the vulnerability of an unenriched condition. This is the central question that we should tackle: does restoration mean playfulness, critical wit, Socratic irony, or rather radical retraction into the earthly condition, into the exposed, non-technological corporeality of the offline reality?

In other words, could we still remain Socratic in a time where over-exhaustion (not only of resources, but also of creativity, of symbols, of words, and of biological energies) constitutes the hallmark? What are the challenges posed to our creative powers—namely to our capacity of addressing the incalculable situation of the present times, as it is addressed for instance by Heike Härting in “Reading In-Common. Configurations of the Incalculable and the Planetary Imagination”?

2. “Riding the beast” through the creation of a perforating language

In a dialogue I had with Horea Poenar and Érik Bordeleau in 2019, which resulted in a text published in 2022 at Școala Ardeleană Publishing House, part of a volume entitled *Inflexions*, the core question we addressed was related to the possibility of going beyond the addiction inflicted by social media. Of course, we realized at that time that the addiction of creating a better, enhanced world, is not new, and has to do with something present in the human psyche since the dawn of time. The answers given by my two dialogue partners went, irretrievably, in the direction of a critical, anti-ideological discourse, which could de-center the globalized data, as well as in the direction of a subversive, de-centered art, which could give voice to the irreducible differences, to transgressive forms of symbolism, of language, present in different regions of the world. If human experience is different, then unifying ideologies and unifying models of virtual worlds could become threatening.

There is another, important point that was evoked by the two speakers, namely the fact that, under the illusion of multiplying desires, social network sacrifices them instead. Projecting ourselves in a second-degree world gives us the impression that reality is boring, dangerous, uncomfortable, whereas the virtual world could give us security, the feeling of being highly connected (Ilea 57). Criticizing ideology means also being able to realize that something, which apparently gives us the illusion of consistency and freedom, turns out to be exactly the opposite. “If there is hope, it can be still found in the contemporary art. Contemporary art is not homogenous, it does not happen the same in Berlin, Montreal or Paris” (70). Art has thus to be de-centered.

If information is the new fuel, what kind of language could still preserve its creativity? In this respect, I will make reference to a text published in 1980 by Nancy Huston (with a second edition in 2002), *Dire et interdire. Éléments de jurologie*, which inquires into the enigmatic nature of the swear words. Elsewhere (in *The Tale-Tellers. A Short History of Humankind*), Huston affirmed, paradoxically, that metaphors and swear words are the most innate symbolic faculty of the human species.

In the following, I would like to tackle the structures of language, which dislodge the self, and make us reconsider the role played by symbolization in inhabiting the world. Of course, Artificial Intelligence could easily replace multilingualism, multiple layers of translation between languages through a powerful tool, through an over enhanced chatGPT capable of transmuting speculative power into a transcriptive engine. But the metaphorizing, as well as the transgressive processes relayed by interdiction—rely on a different level of decrypting the world. Natural languages are dynamizing the process of creativity. If languages are different, it is because world cannot be performed in a unified way:

We will write in foreign languages (real or made-up ones) in order to come to the realization that all languages are foreign. And those that are not are uninteresting in their self-reflecting egoism. All live languages are creolized by what Édouard Glissant has called the chaos-world. The first need thus is to have done with the prison-house of the mother tongue, i.e., why should one have to write in the mummy/daddy language, why should that oedipal choice be the only possible or legitimate one, why should it not be my own choice, that moment of one's discovery of the other, that moment when it is our body/mind that speaks and not that of our progenitors. (Joris 7)

If transgression words are different, it is because they unsettle the real in performative ways and give rise to creativity. The taboo-words and the swear words are made out of fear—ancient fears that persist and clarify humans' connection to the sacred, to power, to the state of exception. They testify for a paradoxically universal marginality.

The interdict words do not place us outside of a language, outside an oppressive language for instance; their power comes rather from a transgressive desire within the language, operating against the language itself—a turnaround of the language: “Because the use of forbidden words does not reflect the desire to be outside a given language—which for historical and political reasons would be felt as oppressive—but a desire to transgress within the language, and which is performed against the language itself.” (Huston 21–22)

I invoke the power of these circumvoluted words (the swear words) because the metaphor is over-exposed to interpretation in the scholar articles related to the study of language and literature. But this cleavage (“the natural catastrophe of language”), made possible by the interdict, could open new ways of addressing creativity: “The taboo words are the natural catastrophe of language. They scatter, as lava, in the holes of the speech. Ever since the

human beings talk, it seems, they have stipulated that all was not good to say” (Huston 26). The taboo words have a precise social function, they unsettle constructed ideologies and de-center language within language itself.

Huston affirms a radical thing—namely that without transgression, no ratio, no reason, no construct of order could exist:

Thus, forbidden words are in no way an epiphenomenon, an accident on the royal road to language acquisition; on the contrary, they are essential. While the rest of the vocabulary gradually loses its motor and hallucinatory character, the taboo words remain as if frozen at a primitive level of symbolization: by maintaining the illusion of concreteness, they allow the progressive abstraction of the rest of the language and its use for higher purposes. In other words, without cacophony, no phony at all: if there had not been “God’s brothels”, there would never have been a *Critique of Pure Reason*. Taboo words tear away the veil of euphemia. These are language-eating words. (Huston 177)

This is an audacious way of addressing language, through its holes, through elements that defy the illusion of translatability, through “tearing away the veil of euphemia”—a rupture that enhances creativity.

In this respect, I would like to draw attention to two other language experiments, belonging to women writers, which unsettle the categories of language and prove once again that, in order to write the *Critique of Pure Reason*, one has to pass through deviational fault lines. One is Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Frankfurter Vorlesungen*, an almost untranslatable series of conferences, because through words such as the German *Umgeben/Umgang, verbindlich/Verbindlichkeit, Wort, Dichter, Dichtung*, and even *Literatur*, the author appropriates connotative and denotative occurrences, perforating the language and asking essential questions such as: Why write? To what end? Is it possible to envisage the end of literature?

Creating language, working with words mean incessantly making recourse to order and reason, but also, and even more importantly, turning around incoherence and contradiction, settling and unsettling the world, hallucinating the real, ruminating the soil and erecting the future. Writing about her own process of creation, Elena Ferrante explains the way through which her writing evolves from a kind of world-scaffolding to a desegregating, convulsive construction, based on chaos and incoherence and which goes beyond the well calibrated writing.

Thus, in order to acknowledge the creative generating power inherent in the “chaos-world”, we should understand the twist operated through disaggregation and recreation, as innate to events. Ferrante writes:

I always start with an integrative writing, nourished by consistencies, which builds a world by placing all its scaffolding in the right place. It’s a solid cage, I build it

with the necessary reality effects, with crypto-quotations taken from ancient and modern mythographies, with my reading background. Then comes—at least I hope it will, I’m counting on it—the convulsive, disintegrating writing, generating oxymorons, ugly-beautiful, beautiful-ugly, which brandishes inconsistencies and contradictions. (Ferrante 43)

This inconsistency mentioned by the writer, the deviational performative (and perforating) language, is part of the continuous processual becoming, of the event. Virtual reality solidifies the event, in which metamorphosis and creation acquire a non-revisable function. The unexpected is leveled to a form in which, in its seemingly unchangeability, it defies the forces of destruction. What is striking is the fact that creative adaptation, similar to the artistic instinct, comes from the capacity to elude death: “A living subject is one who has been able to deceive death by changing her identity when necessary. She is disposed to incessant mutations and capable of changing her state or condition, especially at the critical moment” (Mbembe 21). This transformational force involves negotiation, randomness, approximation and defies the idea of a *facies* that can’t be revised—our self-eroticized self in the network. The reality in itself involves endless transformation, through the ugly, through inconsistencies and contradictions. The microworld created by language signifies also practices of care, of truth and justice, almost through a genetical regeneration. To elude the threat of fixation, of freezing, and of dissociation within an illusory self, the creative language, which is able to dislodge the illusion of virtual self, is embedded in the paradoxes of the body, of flesh, of the skin and of the nerves:

At the Age of the Earth, we will need a language that constantly drills, perforates, and digs like a tendril, knows how to become a projectile, a sort of absolute fullness, of will which, ceaselessly, torments reality. Its function will not only be to break down the locks, but also to save lives from the disaster that awaits.” (Mbembe 13–14)

Even if we doubt the possibility that language could dislodge the body of the planetary community and counter the powerful fiction that image builds nowadays, I think, in the footsteps of Achille Mbembe, that this perforating language should also be able to express the scale of infinite probabilities on which information is performed. In this respect, the creative impulse of the nexus, as mentioned by Noah Yuval Harari in Harari in *Nexus. A History of Information since the Stone Age to AI*, which goes from the Stone Age to the present days, is placed over and over in the old Platonic problem of representation, namely in the possibility to fully access “the real.” Moreover, creation resides in our capability to perform language, so that it should adjust to the planetary community, placed not in the seduction of virtual escapism, but in the “incalculable” element of truth, care, and justice. It is a language that should become able to elude the irreparable.

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