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The Hermeneutics of Literary Identities

Un-riddling the riddle: The Diabolic Spider-Web

The *enigmatic* is the constitutive principle of the literary text (Jean Bessière, 1993). But the text cannot be completely inaccessible. There must be at least one entrance/exit to its hermetic, labyrinthine and divided space. Such is the phenomenology of the literary text. And every age has its own parameters of the hermetic. Although it is considered a metaphysical category, the enigma of the literary text is not an ahistorical but rather a socio-culturally determined category. The easily readable text explains the meaning of the hermetic text-within-the-text. The atypical areas function as inserted texts within the text, which are recognizable by their otherness, density and violence. These demand a different, parallel reading. Interpretation is an act of revelation, an act of epiphany. What is projected discreetly in the interpretation, as a human project, is the divine principle.

The greater the enigma of the text, the stronger is the need to interpret that text. The greater the enigma of the text, the greater is the enigma of the interpretation and the higher is the probability of the interpretation being open to all sorts of interpretations, conflicting or dialogical. The analogy is clear: this complex labyrinth is subject to delusions, wanderings, mistakes, punishments and victims; the complex riddle presupposes a large number of wrong answers and sacrifices if the un-riddling is subject to certain sanctions!

In attempting to constitute a possible interpretative-divinatory model, I shall take as an example the story *Las Babas del Diablo* (1959–1998) by the Argentinean and French writer Julio Cortazar.¹ The uncertainty and the bordering of the hermeneutical identities in this story are so symptomatic that,

without doubt, they can help in the understanding and defining of their structure. In the interpretation of this story, I chose the method of question and answer characteristic of the riddle and the solution as its implicit part. The structure of the enigma (the riddle, puzzle, cipher, code) includes the solution.² Rather than taking on the burden of the finality and infinity of interpretation, the interpreter should carefully follow the trails of the solution written inside the riddle of the text/discourse with the purpose of reconstructing them into a harmonious and well-argued interpretation. The interpreter is a practitioner and therefore should be completely and inventively devoted to the *interpretative-divinatory* cause.

The riddle has the structure of a *figure of speech*. It speaks one thing, but thinks and tells several things, like the spoken, close to the spoken, opposite to the spoken, contradictory to the spoken, anagrammatic, coded... The Sphinx's riddle posed to the people of Thebes and to Oedipus is remembered as a whole that contains, as its constitutive part, the answer. The answer is an inseparable part of the riddle. The answer, in accordance with the usual conventions, is also given and written *backwards, under the text*, after the text, in the text; the answer can be placed in brackets, added as an annex at the end of the text, converted and allowed to be read afterwards when the game of un-riddling is over. The answer to the riddle is a key which must be discovered by the *reader* even though it has been predicted by the author from the beginning. The answer is contained in the text of the riddle itself and is not given explicitly, but rather in an enigmatic form and in some figure of speech: metaphor, symbol, metonymy, irony, parody, allusion, antithesis, grotesque, anagram. Not everybody can find the answer. The

¹ Julio Cortazar, *Las Babas del Diablo*, first published in 1959, from his book of collected stories *Las Armas Secretas*, here quoted from the Serbian translation published in the collection *Apokalipsa u Solentinameu*, (Belgrade, Rad, 1998).

² In French, *déviner* means to decrypt something while reading and creating. Marcel Proust says: 'On devine en lisant, on crée.' (*Remembrance of Things Past*, volume 3 (1954) p. 656.). This verb is paronomastically close to the verb *diviner*. Therefore the semantic analogies between unriddling and divination are common. In his academic speech 'About the term hermeneutics' ('Sur la notion d'herméneutique...') (1987; 1st ed. 1829) pp.155-173), Schleiermacher claims that comprehension (a momentary act of reaction to a certain statement) is a kind of divination. He proposes a sort of *divinatory hermeneutics* that would not be limited to works of literature, but instead would encompass all areas of speech and communication in which a subject expresses thoughts or series of thoughts and another subject perceives them, needs to understand them and, above all, has to recognize the way in which the interlocutor connects the ideas. This communicative process includes hermeneutical operations.

inability to find the answer, in certain socio-cultural situations, is sanctioned, even with tragic consequences, at the price of being sentenced to death. Those who know the answer are saved from the death penalty. The ones who have conceived the question and the answer (the riddle) have power over others. The inventors of riddles play the symbolic part of *SPHINXES*. The greatest power lies with those sphinxes that ask questions essential for the survival of people—even humanity.

The answer is *discreetly* hinted at in the riddle itself, within the text. The conquering of that discreetness of the answer, the conquering of the space 'between the lines' and the deciphering of the figure which conceals the riddle, represents the 'final goal' of interpretation. But the *game of un-riddling* should not be underestimated. The un-riddling is perhaps the most important part of the riddle. During the act of interpretation, the interpreter is obsessed by the concealed dimension of the text. To deny the yearning for the 'true' answer to the riddle is like making an attempt to reduce the interpreter to an anaemic and powerless observer that pushes the Sisyphean rock only with the purpose of taking it *up*, because of the punishment, and not for the enjoyment. Interpreting is not the simple endurance of a prison sentence as of one sentenced to death. The hermeneutical ideal is to place every rock/cube in its proper space and to build something more than just a simple collection of rocks/cubes. The hermeneutical project is ambitious. The riddle has the structure of a work of art. The hermeneutist is a thinking subject who enriches nature and participates in the creation of the work of art, given that the interpretation and the reader are considered to be legitimate participants in the aesthetic act of communication and reception. The hermeneutist is not Sisyphus, but more like Oedipus. The hermeneutist influences history, changes history. The right answers lead to unpredictable karmic tragedies. Hermeneutics is the antechamber of the tragedies of humanity and history.

A draft of an interpretative model: questions

We can distinguish certain unavoidable questions that should be asked in the course of the interpretation of a literary text.³ *First question*: which part of the text can be recognized as the most enigmatic and which part, by its nature, has the power to indicate the allusive solution of the riddle? *Second question*: which other parts are distinguished by exceptional hermetic qualities, atypicality, entropy, delicacy and polysemy, so that it becomes necessary to understand and define their identity? *Third question*: in which parts does the semantic transgression happen in the text? Where does the order of things change in the reverse and indicative direction? Where does the conversion take place—on the level of discourse and plot, on the level of a storyteller and focalizer, on the level of character, on the level of time and space, in regards to the viewpoint in the depiction of the world and the change of the historical perspective? In this context, if we are talking about a narrative text (a story, novella, novel), the question arises: where does the plot generate the discourse and where does it diverge from the original direction into a new, unexpected one? *Fourth question*: which parts of the text can be distinguished as a potential key in the solving of the enigma? Are there other texts from the same or from another author that can support and lead the interpretation in the direction of the possible answer?

1. A hermetic area: homonymy

When solving the riddle of the story *The Diabolic Spider-Web* by Julio Cortazar, first, we ask the following question: *which part of the text can be recognized as the most enigmatic?* Or, to elaborate, which segment of the story generates constant and deliberate enigma with its *homonymy*: the title, the names, the space, the time, the narrator, the action, the character? If the interpreter discovers the source of the homonymy (the ambiguity), there is hope that the interpreter will be able to understand the structure, the function and the meaning of that homonymy.

³ Roland Barthes speaks of so-called *hermeneutemes* as units of the hermeneutic code. He classifies several hermeneutemes: the subject matter or the object of the enigma, the preposition or the signalisation of the enigma, the formulation of the enigma, the search for the answer, the snares on the way to the truth, the elusion or the space between the truth and the snare/lie, the hindrances to the solving of the enigma or the predicted insolvability of the enigma, the removed answer and the solving of the riddle. (*S/Z*, 1974).

In Cortazar's story *The Diabolic Spider-Web*, the title carries a high degree of ambiguity, of flagrant homonymy and noisy murmur. The original title of Cortazar's story *Las Babas del Diablo*, codes the basic thematic strand of the story in the form of a metaphorical cipher. The title reflects the enigma of the story. *The untangling of the semantic knot of the title is the basis for the interpretation of the entire story.* Therefore, we begin the interpretation with the title. With its polysemy, the title suggests diverse possibilities. The title is one of the most delicate declarations that are entropic, difficult to translate, almost untranslatable, or which leave room for and justify several different translations. *The translation* (from one language to another, in the literal and figurative sense) is the first interpretation. The interpretation is, by definition, a translation of a certain text from one language to another, from the language of literature to the language of the essay, for example.

(a) *The Devil's Drool*

Originally, Cortazar's story is titled *Las Babas del Diablo*. All research into the meaning of the original Spanish title shows that it does not represent an idiom and therefore does not require re-coding of the idiomatic cultural and traditional content; instead, it can be translated elementarily. The literal translation would be *The Devil's Drool* (*dribble, mucus*). When reading the story, we come to the conclusion that, even with this translation, the title has an acceptable semantic correlation with the story and its contents. If saliva is a metonymic projection of the insatiable *hunger, desire, lust*, then indeed the title seems suitable to the narrated content of the story. That content implies the state of a person 'drooling over something', which usually happens when the person desires something forbidden, inaccessible or hard to reach. *The man in black* from Cortazar's story desires the boy and he can be represented by a picture of the devil *drooling* over the coveted object of desire—the boy. In this case we can speak of the *diabolical circle of lust*, from which there is no way out: a circle that demands either fulfilment of the desire or a radical, tragic and metaphysical leap (help from a higher instance, *Deus ex machina*, Chance, the Photograph...).

b) *The Devil's Stains*

The title could also be translated as *The Devil's Stains*. The stains refer to the semantic traces, the dark spots and taints that make the story hermetic

and non-transparent. This translation alludes to ‘the stain on the stone wall’ captured within the frame of the photograph which attests to *something else* (the tragic, violent exit from the diabolical circle of lust). This translation leads the interpretation into another direction: that *the blonde woman* is the victim who suffers in the violent act of revenge when the man in black, furious, lashes out against her and *plays the game*, commits *the crime*... If the boy by any chance knows or finds out that the woman is killed because of him, he will become the victim of a dark memory and an incurable feeling of guilt. The boy will also have *stains on his conscience*; and he shall have to learn how to live with them and die with them. The translation *The Devil's Stains* also alludes to the other signifying denotations that the story offers: the birds, the doves, the spider-webs, the clouds, the blurring of the eyesight and the webs in front of the eyes. We shall point to several quotations of statements that recur symptomatically (as in a dream):

‘... like a big bird out of focus’ (which enters the frame and blurs the view of the scene); ‘what remains to be said always is some cloud, two clouds...’ ‘the stain on the stone wall was out of the frame...’; ‘the dark stains on the stone wall’; ‘now a foamy little cloud appears, almost lonesome in the sky’... All that, the birds flying in front of the camera lens and into the descriptions of the story, the clouds constantly passing in front of the eyes, the autumnal *slimy spider-web* of the Indian summer, floating in the air, the stains (blood) on the wall, the uncontrollable desire to tell the story in an attempt to wash away the stains on the conscience, the gossamer in the eyes, the fog, the sludge, that entire assembly of dark areas constitutes a relatively consistent circle of signs and meanings which form a good basis for the offered version of translation/interpretation of the title. They offer an acceptable interpretative key for the decrypting of the story and the un-riddling of its riddle. Obviously, the devil has his fingers all over this story, leaving his fingerprints and marks everywhere, just as—on the other hand—the storyteller ‘shoves his nose into other peoples business’, where it doesn't belong, thus reaching even the devil's fingers.

c) *The Devil's Clouds*

The spider-webs and the clouds in Cortazar's story constitute interchangeable metaphorical projections. Consequently, the translation of the

title could be as follows: *The Devil's Clouds* or, possibly, *Little Diabolical Clouds*. From the entire story, what truly remains in the end are only the clouds: here one moment, gone the next, clouds passing from one end of the photograph to the other, through the pictures of memory, in the imagination and in reality, in front of the eyes, as if they are tiny clouds in front of which the occasional dove flies, turning into a large grey cloud which conceals reality, conceals identity, conceals the past, makes the characters unrecognizable, the actions impossible to follow, clouds the mind. These devilish clouds are a semantic inversion of *the devil's stains* and *gossamer* in front of the eyes and within the consciousness of the narrator and the reader. They enable the transition from the lingual to the alingual state of mind, the transition from a state of consciousness to a state of *silence/emptiness* which refuses to face the truth, which crosses the threshold of consciousness and goes beyond it, where a person loses their mind and faints, where they cross the thin line between life and death. And the story, like the narrator says at one point, actually begins backwards, from the end, 'the one behind, at the beginning, which, in the end, is the best, if we are trying to narrate something' (118).

d) *The Diabolic Spider-Web of Virginity*

There is another possible translation of the title of Cortazar's story that would also be suitable. That translation would be *The Diabolic Spider's Web of Virginity*. There is one context of the story that explicitly alludes to virginity and implicitly to the devil—to the man in black—to the deal with the proposal and the acceptance of the proposal to sell one's own virginity for money, out of curiosity, weakness, confusion. Describing the boy's flight, the narrator makes this statement:

'...and suddenly (it seemed almost incredible) he turned and started to run, believing, the poor thing, that he was walking, while in fact he was running as fast as he could, passing the car, disappearing like a thread of virginal spider web floating in the autumnal air. And that virginal spider web is also called the devil's drool...'

The devil reaches after the boy's virginity, wishing to take it away from him, maybe even succeeding, although not in the literal or vulgar sense of the word. The story is a parable for the taking of the boy's virginity, the narrator's virginity, the virginity of the photograph, of life, of the purpose of living...

Nothing is as it used to be. Everything is transformed, initiated into a different form of reality, of a vision, of a plot, of narration. Everything is tainted by the devil. Yes, the very act of narration is no longer absolutely pure, innocent; on the contrary, it is damaged, impure, sinful. Sin and virginity explain each other. The syntax is also damaged. It too is no longer 'virginal'. And the syntax of the paradigmatic points itself is not pure or innocent—quite the contrary. The author deliberately highlights this, from the very beginning of the story, from the moment when we cross the threshold of the real world to the imaginary world of literature which has some mysterious umbilical connection with reality. That same reality from which he so often and so emphatically tries to distance himself. As if looking for a form of compensation, because of the very fact that the distance between literature and reality is more operational than essential.

The syntax has lost its virginity and in a diabolical way. Also the interpretation, in that respect, is not virginal, but from the very start is initiated within a consciousness that is diabolically covered in spider-webs, clouded, bright in some spots, cloudy in others, never fully and completely clear. Nothing is innocent: not the look, nor the incident, nor the camera itself with its lens, or the photograph... This is a story about the loss of virginity, about the desecrated identity of virginity, about the diabolical webs of the mind, of the look, of the picture, of the plot... indeed, why not *The Diabolic Spider's Web of Virginity!*

(e) (Non) final choice: *The Diabolic Spider-Web*

When re-reading the story, we discover another possible interpretation of the homonymy of the title that is in a semantic correlation with the plot, which is a mytheme of the meaning of the story. It is a version of the translation that in English would be *The Devil's Spider-Webs* or *The Diabolic Spider-Web* (spider-web is a synecdoche of the plural spider-webs). The spider's webs are, at the same time, moist and slimy, they only appear in some parts of the world and in the time of a so-called late, Indian summer. The devil's spider-webs appear when we are in a period of prolonged summer: it is autumn, even the beginning of winter, but the days are sunny, pleasantly warm and nice. It is then that sticky, slimy, elusive spider-webs fly in the air. Gossamers. Stains. Little greyish-white clouds. Incarnations of the mysterious and

enigmatic. Signification of the absent. Signification of the emptiness which is the 'true connective-tissue' of this story.

Whichever option we choose, it would not be wrong, although neither of them contains *a priori* all possible semantic implications and translations. The translation cannot be integral, likewise with interpretation. It remains the case that we choose one option, one possibility. The interpretation, just like the translation, is restrictive. We decide on the title *Diabolic Spider-Web*, derived by analogy from the Latin term *circulus vitiosus*—diabolic (vicious) circle—which has a spectral meaning because it refers to the hermetic quality of the meaning, to the labyrinth of interpretation and because it is the one closest to the other translations. *The Diabolic Spider-Web*, if well contemplated, can also signify diabolic clouds, diabolic virginity, devil's drool, stains, gossamers and birds, and all of this not as a 'property' of the devil but a symbolic attribute involving a certain dosage of emotiveness in the description which implies fatal, unfortunate and damned spider webs.

2. *The identity of the narrator / storyteller*

And there was a storyteller and there was a story! The story does not narrate itself. For a story to exist it must be re-told. There must be someone to re-tell it. The identity of the storyteller is an important part of the subject of interpretation. There is always someone (a subject) who invents or *divulges* the plot, someone who assembles it on the basis of something that has been seen, heard and experienced. There is also someone who comes to know the story, someone who hears it from someone else, accepts it from someone else, processes it on the basis of previously acquired and heard myths, legends, traditions, jokes, anecdotes and so forth, in order to tell it afterwards themselves, passing it on to someone else. That is the genesis of retelling: historical, psychological, anthropological, traditional, ontological... The story needs to be passed onto others, to be retold to someone. The story wouldn't be a story if it were not retold. Whether the retelling will be oral or written form is another matter, maybe even a secondary matter in regards to the anthology of the story. What matters is that the story is re-told from one to another

(person), being re-told, interpreted and memorized, because the re-telling is the only way for the story to exist, to BECOME a story and to REMAIN a story. To BE A STORY. And there was a story!

There can be no story without a storyteller. There can be no narrative, no novel, without a story. The story and the storyteller are the basic constitutive elements of the narrative and the novel. The characters who act—restituting the plot into a direct dramatic act—and the absent storyteller are the constitutive parts of the play. In the play, the story is absent because the storyteller is absent. In the short story, the novella and the novel, there is a storyteller who is present and a story that is present. The presence of the storyteller and the story is effectuated differently, but they are never completely extinguished. All those who have tried to destroy the story and the storyteller have fallen into heavy misconceptions that are constantly confirmed and demystified by historical practice.

The *re-telling* is an act of interpretation, and by that also an inter-subjective act. The plot is not a solipsistic act. The story is a form of interpretation of some 'reality' of a certain time, of someone's *ethics*. While retelling, the storyteller interprets the action that they are retelling. For example, the storyteller ironically refers to the action that takes place on the quay of the Seine as 'comedy'(126). The storyteller is the intermediary of the subjective and collective consciousness that always conceal someone's interest, some ethical system of values, some *intention* (Umberto Eco, 1992). The storyteller tells the story either to the imaginary or to the real reader. The storyteller is the interpreter of the plot. The reader is also an interpreter of the plot. The storytelling and the interpretation are related inter-subjective acts. The interpretation of literary texts is an interpretation of the interpreting in the plot: *meta-interpretation* in the true sense of the word.

The identity of the storyteller also calls into question the identity of the characters and 'complicates' the position of the reader. In Julio Cortazar's story *Diabolic Spider-Web*, the identity of the storyteller is built through deliberate multiplication, which is in accordance with the decentralization of the focalizer, with the multiplication of points of view and of the lens (emotionally and mentally) and with the replacement of the instance of the character with the instance of the storyteller. This, in a certain sense

introduces suspense, skepsis, a feeling of mistrust and evasion of credibility. The storyteller is inclusive, like *genre mixte*: encompassing the identities of others, not excluding. The fusion of the identities of the storyteller (and, analogous to this, also of the identities and position of the author), the constant change of the grammatical subject by which the storyteller is represented, the change of the type of narration⁴ and type of focalization of the narrated world, the incertitude of the identity of the observer, the lens and the focalizer, are a form—even an essence—of the inability to recognize the identity of meaning, of semantic identity. This is one of the basic indications that the author and the text give to the reader and the interpreter, which must be complied with and respected during the interpretation. We are talking about grammatical errors, allusions and a certain relish in the inducement and arousal of the reader's awareness that such multiple and ambiguous identities are not accidental. On the contrary, these constitute a deliberated projection of reality, of some half-forgotten reality or a reality we refuse to remember. The insistence on misleading the reader as to the identity of the character and of the storyteller is accomplished in the form of compensation: the more the storyteller hides his identity, the greater is the need for him to do so and thus the greater is the syllogistic probability that he is you, you are me, I am him... It is then that we resort to concealment of the reality behind imaginary worlds and to simulation of fabricated situations. Thus the borders between these are made relative.

In the story *The Diabolic Spider-Web* we can distinguish several types of storytellers at the level of narrative voice:

(1) First, in the story *The Diabolic Spider-Web* we have a *heterodiegetic storyteller* who is positioned in the opening frame of the story and who appears in the closing frames of the story and is occasionally heard during the

⁴ Indirect speech (present in different ways) prevails in narrative text, while *direct* speech prevails in plays. In both discourses, elements of direct and indirect speech are combined. The importance is what is primary in the text (functional, systematic, constitutive) rather than what is secondary and conditional. Besides, indirect and direct speech are present in all forms of speech—for example in colloquial language—but this by itself does not automatically make them literary speech. The aestheticism of speech is connected to other determinants. In contemporary Macedonian narrative literature, direct speech is predominant. This is an interesting occurrence that could form a separate subject of inquiry. There is an impression that dramatic elements and elements from everyday communication have been preserved both in the short story and in the novel. The question thus arises: does the play precede the narration?

narration, cleverly hiding behind one of the characters. This heterodiegetic storyteller—who poses as a ‘professional’ narrator, as a narrator who has a special or primary position of a storyteller, distinct, or with the tendency to distinguish itself as much as possible, from the position of the characters—represents a bridge between the characters and the author, between fiction and history. This bond is more provocative and possible rather than explicitly stated. Its provocativeness becomes an integral part of the diabolical game of elusive meaning in a circle that becomes a whirlpool, a dark hole that pulls everything into its core or bottomless abyss. It also signalizes the diversity between the author, the storyteller and the character. Thus autobiographical and personal implications are indicated as possible, even probable, but not as existing certainties in the artistic world of the story.

We recognize the presence of this heterodiegetic storyteller by the way in which it is initiated with the use of the grammatical form of first person plural (especially in the opening frame of the story), which indicates, on the one hand, distancing from the world of the story and on the other hand an approximation to the position of the author. From the beginning of the story, he introduces elements of theoretical, essayistic and meta-textual *scepticism*:

‘We’ll never know how to narrate it, whether in the first or second person, using the third person plural or by constantly inventing useless forms. If we could say: I see me climbing on the moon, or: we hurting deep inside the eyes, and especially like this: you blonde woman was the clouds which keep on passing in front of my your his ours yours their faces that, what the hell.’ (117)

From time to time, the presence of the heterodiegetic storyteller is indicated by the use of the third impersonal person singular that, in this story, does not show a lot of interest for the auctorial position of a commentator that would subsume the different voices and objectives into the dominant point of view of the author; instead, it creates the illusion of a meta-literary positing of premises, of self-referential theoretical and general standpoints, un-biased meta-fictional knowledge. Such theoretical suppositions and premises come and end unannounced, with no special markers, thus achieving the *effect of fusion* of the viewpoints of the character and the storyteller, from homodiegetic to heterodiegetic level. This happens, for example, when the storyteller gives theoretical instructions about photography and literature:

'Out of all means that man has for fighting against emptiness, photography is one of the best, so children should be instructed in this art from a young age, because this activity requires discipline, aesthetic education, a good eye and a steady hand.' (p. 119)

or:

'Michel is guilty of literature, of surrealistic fabrications. He liked nothing better than inventing extraordinary situations, unusual, weird characters, not always repulsive monsters. But that woman simply aroused the imagination, fantasy, perhaps leaving just enough clues to attain the truth.' (p. 125)

(2) Second, the homodiegetic storyteller in *The Diabolic Spider-Web* includes the identities of the two very delicately distinguished *voices* of the translator-writer and of the photographer-amateur, the Frenchman and Chilean, Roberto Michel. The introduction of the instance of the writer and the writer's lens evokes the autobiographical thread of the identity of the polarized storyteller. There is some secret 'French' connection between Roberto Michel and Julio Cortazar. But the autobiographical implications of *The Diabolic Spider-Web* are so carefully measured that they remain within the sphere of hypothesis. Unlike in this story, the autobiographical implications in the story *Apocalypse in Solentiname* are much more obvious and deliberately indicated in the memoir-like foundation of the story.

There are three homodiegetic storytellers in *The Diabolic Spider-Web*: one translator, one photographer and one objective/lens in the role of a storyteller. They all adopt the position of a character-storyteller, of a subject-witness and participant in the events that are the subject of the narration, but all of them also become at a certain point the subject of observation. It is not only the identities of the storyteller that are fused, but also the positions of storyteller-focalizer. The homodiegetic and heterodiegetic positions constantly switch and hybridize, with no logical sequence. The splitting of the homodiegetic storyteller is the basis for the distinction of two viewpoints in relation to the subject who observes and the subject who narrates. This process is conducted on a meta-lingual level, when the plot becomes dependent on the code of both discourses: literature and photography (and, we could say, film, too). On the other hand, literature and photography are juxtaposed to the reality that changes its face, depending on who looks at it, who constitutes it, who evaluates it, who interprets it in the form of a plot. The

final impression from the reading of the story refers not only to the non-finiteness of the identity of its meaning and constituent elements (narrator, plot, character, space-time), but also of the concept of reality itself, which loses some of its 'realism' and enters the area of the unreal and fantastical. Strictly comprehended historical and biographical reality is restrictive of the unreal. Fictional reality, on the other hand, is porous and admits elements of fantasy, unreality, illogicality and falsehood/fabrication:

'Lies permeate every act of seeing, because lies are what distance us most from ourselves... In any case, if the opportunity for lying is well-predicted beforehand, seeing becomes possible; maybe it suffices just to make the right choice between the act of seeing and the seen, to strip things from all those strange clothes.' (121)

The homodiegetic storyteller is not represented in a monotonous or unambiguous manner. On the contrary, the subtlest game of transmutation of identities happen in his representation. But such identities, God! The position of the character constantly changes, from object of observation to subject of observation and vice versa. The two characters are two narrating, then also two focalizing positions, which converge into one single but divided character whose multiplicity moves along the lines of divided discourses and experiences of language/literature and picture/photography. So, the storyteller has several personifications:

- Sometimes he appears in the *I-form*: the *I* of Roberto Michel, which is divided into the *I* of Michel the photographer and the *I* of Michel the translator, then the *I* of the narrator and in the end the autobiographical *I* of Cortazar, with elements of pseudo-simulation and mimicry.

- Sometimes in the third person singular: from the position of a personal storyteller—neutral and objective storyteller-camera, according to the typology of Franz Shtanzl—but also from the position of auctorial storyteller, again slightly closer to the author's position.

- Sometimes in the first person plural, when he says: we have to free ourselves of the shame and tell the story because storytelling is something like breathing, something essential for survival; or when he says - 'because we were photographers, I'm a photographer,' when he describes the man who steps out to take pictures, before even mentioning Michel (p. 118).

In *The Diabolic Spider-Web* there is an ironic underlining of the aspiration to introduce distinctions between narrating positions and an insistence on nullifying these distinctions. On a higher level of identification of the subjects of narration, the category *everyone is and no one is a storyteller* is introduced. *It was and it wasn't. Eixo era y no era.* South American magic, illusion, freedom! Magic realism! The identity of the storyteller is brought into direct connection with the manner of narration, with the subject of narration, with the event, the memories of the event and the subject to whom it all happened. A seemingly simple plot has been diabolically complicated, made illegible and unrecognizable. Who steps out of his apartment on November 7th one Sunday morning in Paris on the street Monsieur le Prince? Who sees the lost boy on the Quai d'Anjou on the Ile St Louis in Paris? Who is 'the blonde woman' that would give *anything*, including her life, in order to convince the boy to agree to *something*? Who is the man with black lips and arms raised in a murderous gesture? Who is the boy? What are the diabolic spider-webs, clouds, slime, doves, sparrows, flying in the air? What is the main event of the plot: is it the observation of the boy and the woman by the photographer-translator; is it the photograph; is it the relationship between art and reality; or the eye and the lens of the camera and its power of a demiurge to capture within the memory of the picture important details which will bring to light another event and form a different story inside the film of the storyteller's memory?

The narrative distinctions in *The Diabolic Spider-Web* are discrete and changeable. The identity of the storyteller is subtly shaded. The multiplicity and even discrepancy of the identity of the storyteller is strictly controlled. The discreetness of the identity of the storyteller is compatible, as we shall see later on, with the discreteness of the identity of the characters in the story and to the discreteness of the meaning. Everything in the story is displaced from its usual bearing: the storyteller, the subjects, the objects of observation, the viewpoint (the viewpoint of the character and the camera lens), the plot, the time (the time of the narration as opposed to narrated time, the semantics of *now*), the space and the meaning. *All and nothing. No one and everyone.* Damned literary and photographic illusion! The deeper the abyss of writing,

the deeper is the abyss of interpretation! The hermetic qualities of literary identities and their hermeneutics are proportional.

At the beginning, after the introductory self-referential remarks about the necessity of retelling the story to others in a magical chain of retelling, he says:

'And since we have to retell, let us introduce some order, let us climb down the stairs of this house, all the way back to the week of November seventh, exactly one month ago. The man walked down the seven flights, in a good mood on that Sunday, with unusually strong sunshine for November in Paris, in the mood to take a walk, to watch the objects, to take some photographs (because we were photographers, I'm a photographer). I already know that the hardest thing to do is to find a way to narrate it all, and I don't mind repeating that. It's going to be hard, since no one really knows who's actually telling the story, is it me or the thing that happened, or the things I see (clouds, the occasional dove) or am I simply telling a truth that is only my truth, and besides it's not true for anyone else except my stomach, for this desire to spill it all out, and in some way, to get it over with, come what may.' (118) [italics added by K.K.]

It is important to stress here that the storyteller draws attention to the confusion that queries several instances, one of which is particularly unusual: the subject of narration may be: (1) the storyteller 'I' (but which *I* is 'another' matter); (2) the incident that occurred (the boy who is the subject of seduction being thrown into the jaws of the man in black; or the 'blonde woman' getting killed under the pressure of the black hands of the black man; or the clouds-cobwebs obscuring the view and the mind; or the photographer-writer burdened by traumatic memories and longing to tell the story?). In the second part of the story, the mutable storyteller identifies himself even with the *lens* of the camera, as a special kind of observer, as a specific point from which to view the world and constitute the meaning of the story (an unexpected twist/transgression in the plot):

'Suddenly the order was upturned, they were alive, they were moving, they made decisions and were decisive, they were walking toward their future; while I, on this side, a prisoner of another time, in a room on the fifth floor, of the fact that I don't know who this man is or that woman or that boy, of the fact that I'm only the lens of my camera, something immobile, incapable of interfering'. (p. 131)

Perception in the story is mobile: several storytellers, several observers, a constant shifting of the positions of the subject and object of observation, the external focalization becomes internal, and vice versa. In a complex and

elusive laboratory of change of identities, there is no single centre of observation, but several. The decentralization is so pronounced, that it turns into a tendentious entropy and relativism of identity in order to achieve the effect that anything is possible because nothing has been portrayed explicitly. The mobility of the observer affects the uncertainty of the *true* event and hinders access to 'the truth'. The hermeneutics of literary identities evinces a deep desire to uncover the truth even while facing the fact that this, for several reasons, is impossible. The search for truth is a challenge for the interpretation of hermetic qualities.

There is something poetic in this story, based on allusion instead of hard and undeniable facts. The recorded photograph has the power to register and memorize the nuances of identity. The photograph is a pretext for the repetition of the narration, for the multiplication of the plot, for the creation of a new plot out of the same events, now transformed, because the objective of the camera and the logic of the photography prevail instead of the consciousness of the photographer and translator. Thus, we get a story-within-a-story. The image of the world in the story is hermetic and in this way rendered aesthetic. Such an image is not a simple *clipping* of reality. In this way, the very basis of the interpretation of the story and its many identities is made literary. The very fact that the photographer is also a *translator* is symptomatic. This is confirmed with the quotation of an unfinished and hermeneutically very indicative passage from the text by Jose Alberto Allende, which alludes to 'the second key that is in the internal nature of the difficulties which societies...' This alien speech interprets the author's speech and directs the interpretation of the story and its literary identities. Translation is a kind of interpretation. Photography is interpretation. There is a *hermeneutics of photography*. The hermeneutics of literature and of photography are closely related in this story.

The problem of literary identities is multiply articulated as a question of: the identity of the storyteller/observer, of the plot and of the subject/object of observation. Precisely because of the fact that it is mystified with the help of the fusions of narrative horizons, with the *ontological inseparability of the voice from the look*, the recognition of the identities grows into the key aspect of the hermeneutics. And since the hermeneutics deals with the hermetic

parts of the text (dark, atypical, complicated, figurative, enigmatic, tangled, labyrinthine), in this interpretation the main targets of detection are (the hermetic qualities of) the identities of the plot, of the storyteller/observer, of the act of narration and observation and in that context of the characters.

3. *The identity of the plot*

And there was a transgression, there was a plot! Let us first look at what the story *The Diabolic Spider-Web* is actually about. What is the plot? We should be able to reconstruct the plot from the discourse it is built into. It can be represented in the discourse (the frame of events, plot, narrative) with the help of diverse constructive methods, standardized by the Russian formalists, by narratologists and theoreticians: in an inverse, discontinuous, elliptical way, with the help of a certain *violence* (transgression, scandal, twist) over its chronological flow, simultaneously, circularly. The reconstruction of the plot returns the chronological logic to the events and registers the main transgression in the plot. It is difficult to reconstruct the plot when the identities of the storyteller, the observer, the character... are drastically impaired. Depending on how many plots one story can generate, the interpretation of that story will be more or less complicated. At every attempt to reconstruct the order of the plot, it attains a different meaning, different composition, a new identity. The plot is the pillar of the meaning of the narrative text (story, novella, novel). Every change of the plot is a change of the meaning of the story, founded on the mobile interpretative perspective. As many plots as there are in the text, there are just as many interpretations, just as many worlds.

It is naïve to underestimate the chronological flow of the plot. The ability to read and reconstruct a plot is proportional to the ability to interpret a fictional text. Fictional texts (stories, novels, novellas, plays) in which we can reconstruct only one plot are simple for interpretation. In this case the interpretation is a comment and riposte to one vision of the world. But a text that generates several stories and on top of that represents all of them as equally improbable, is an ambiguous text par excellence. The interpretation of

such a text does not have any final versions, but only probable interpretations, which is a cause for the existence of an illusion that the interpretation is *infinite*. There simply aren't enough arguments for the confirmation of the priority or superiority of one meaning/plot; instead, there are enough arguments for the continuous existence of all the portended notional structures and plots. The interpretation of such a text is *risky*, and the text is attractive for repeated readings and interpretations. That is the reason why certain works of literature are a common subject of interpretation, unlike others. This is the case with, for example, *The Turn of The Screw* by Henry James, *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf, *The Trial*, *The Judgment* (and others) by Franz Kafka, *In the Thicket* by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, *The Lost Letter* by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov, *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, *On Heroes and Tombs* by Ernesto Sabato, and others.

In Julio Cortazar's story *The Diabolic Spider-Web*, several stories differentiate themselves, stories which are in a mutual (semantic) connection and which form an artistic world of the kind *story-within-a-story*, *story-behind-the-story*, or in other words a world behind the world and *mise-en-abîme*... The very fact that the retold events are observed through different lenses—the eyes of the writer, the eyes of the photographer and the lens of the camera itself—allows the possibility for diverse interpretations of the story. The identity of the story is not mechanical, but mysteriously multiplied. There is an introductory plot in this story, which follows a certain logical turn of events. But there are also others, less stereotypical plots, a product of the imagination of the photographer-storyteller, of the enlarged photograph and of the 'film' it develops inside the storyteller's consciousness as a kind of literary remembrance which together constitute the hermetic nature of the narrative in the story *The Diabolic Spider-Web*. Precisely that hermetic character of the story is the subject of consideration of this analysis. The hermetic aspect of the text and not the text itself is the object of literary hermeneutics.

The first story: the code of the narration

Roberto Michel, photographer and translator, one Sunday afternoon on November 7th in Paris, steps out of his apartment and walks towards the Seine along the Quai d'Anjou, on the Ile Saint Louis with the intention of going for a walk and taking some pictures in the dazzling Indian Summer sun. He sits down on a bench and searches for something interesting to take a picture of. He observes, waits and enjoys. He notices an adult, small and slim blonde woman and an adolescent boy standing on the quay. The woman tries to persuade the boy into something important. He supposes that she's offering him his first sexual experience. He imagines the entire situation according to the stereotypical notions. He sets his camera to capture them in an embrace which would show the expression of confusion, disgrace and curiosity on the boy's face, while the blonde woman confides some 'silent story' to him, trying hard to convince him into something (for her!) terribly important. (Stories can convince, change someone's mind; stories have power!) At that moment, the photographer notices a car parked near by in which an adult man with a hat on his head is sitting and reading a newspaper, or maybe taking a nap or *maliciously enjoying the waiting*. At one point, the photographer captures *all this* in his shot, the camera clicks and he takes the picture. *They* notice it. The woman complains, telling him he has no right to take their picture.⁵

She wants the film. The boy escapes, running as fast as he can, like 'a thread of virginal spider web floating in the autumnal air', which in Spanish is also called 'the devil's drool'. The man, who up to that point has hidden behind his indifference, steps out of the car, with a hat on his head and a newspaper in his hands, pale, his face bloodless, looking like *flour*, and walks towards the two of them. Michel escapes without giving them the film and returns to his house.

The story within the first story (the silent story):

⁵ When describing the blonde woman, the storyteller (or maybe Roberto Michel, almost Roberto Michel) says:

'She was small and slim, which are not the precise words for describing what she was really like, wearing a leather coat, almost black, almost long, almost beautiful. All the wind of that morning (it was barely blowing now, and it wasn't cold) was blowing through her blonde hair, which was framing her pale and dark face—two incompatible adjectives—while the entire world could stand dreadfully alone in front of her black eyes, in front of her eyes that were descending on things like two eagles, two leaps into emptiness, two torrents of green sludge. I'm not describing anything, it's more like I'm trying to understand. And I said two torrents of green sludge.' (122)

We can differentiate a sub-story here: the silent story that the 'blonde woman' tells the boy in confidence, silently, whispering in his ear. This story *is not audible* in the narrative and therefore remains within the sphere of hypothesis. Anyone can put it together according to their own ideas, based on the principle of predictability. Stereotypes are once-established misconceptions that generate a large number of new individual and collective misconceptions in the history of humanity! We are talking here about the stereotype of seduction. Seduction is described as 'a cruel game, the desire to possess without satisfaction, to arouse on someone else's behalf...' (125) This silent story has a rhetorical purpose of convincing the boy into something that horrifies him, judging by the descriptions of his reactions, by the frowns and expressions on his face. She has to motivate the boy into accepting the game known as 'initiation of the adolescent'. Maybe it is so. But maybe the game of the 'stolen innocence' is crueller than seems at first sight. The world's dramaturgy is full of these seemingly stereotypical stories with inherited and adopted illusions that turn the world into a torture chamber, into a place of tragedies and traumas. Everyone hopes that they will not be a victim of the stereotype, that stereotypes are for others and then everyone becomes the victim of an uncritically accepted stereotype. Formally, this *story-pantomime* is known only to the two characters, the woman and the boy. Everyone else can just assume it, based on the familiarity with the stereotype. But in literature, paradoxically, it is precisely redundant areas such as clichés that create a loud hermeneutical noise. Silence is an enigma. Silence is a hermetical area that needs to be interpreted. It is precisely this absent story that will later offer a new key for interpretation of the story.

The second story: the code of photography

Repetition of a part of the first story: Michel (him, I, we) steps out one Sunday morning to take a walk along the quay of the Seine and to take some pictures. He notices a boy and a blonde woman in intimate conversation. He frames them (along with everything else that, at that moment, flies in front of them or reaches them) and takes the picture. When she notices him, the woman asks Michel for the film. The boy runs away as fast as he can. From

the car parked near the quay, a black man steps out. Michel does not give them the film. He escapes to his house.

Up to this point, the plot is the same. After several days, Michel, in his studio on the fifth floor, develops the film and observes the picture he took on the quay. Then he enlarges it to life-size, like a poster, and projects it like a film on a screen. This is where the second part of the story begins and with it a new plot unfolds. This plot is reconstructed with the help of the enlargement of the photograph and represents a new vision of the same event. Now Michel is observing the actions from the position of the camera lens, at the moment when the picture was taken. He watches for a long time. He sees things in a different way. He's looking through the prism of the photograph and thus he constructs the new plot. *Now he realizes* that—probably—the blonde woman is seducing the boy for someone else and not herself. That *someone else* is the man in black. 'Closing the eyes, if I closed them at all, I saw the scene as it was...' (125) says the storyteller when trying to understand the 'event', as opposed to stereotypical conceptions about the loss of virginity. This other reality is reflected in the boy's eyes, but he only comes to notice this in the photograph. In the eyes of the boy there is the reflection of the silhouette of the black, concealed man, 'the true master' of the situation. Now he understands that the role of the woman is to deceive the boy into voluntarily accepting the part of the victim: 'a prisoner whose hands are tied up with flowers' (130), a prisoner who 'strips down the last remains of his freedom' (124). While running away, after reaching a certain distance, Michel turns back for another look at the woman and the black man and sees them arguing on the stone wall of the quay. They stand motionless, the man with his arm raised and the woman leaning against the stone wall above the Seine trying somehow pointlessly and in vain to run away. To save herself. Precisely at the moment when he is crossing over to the other side. Maybe. Michel notices the dark stains on the stone wall. Blood. The devil's stains. The taints on the meaning. The clouds in front of the lens. The sludge in the eyes. He can't do anything to help. A sudden sense of guilt. The proof is imprinted on the photograph:

'And what I imagined then was far less dreadful than the reality, that woman who wasn't there for herself, wasn't caressing him, or offering herself to the

boy, or encouraging him for her own pleasure, not wanting to take away that angel with ruffled hair and play with his fear and his attractiveness full of desire. The true master was waiting, smiling shamelessly...' (130)

The story founded upon the word and literature is closer to the lie/fabrication. The story founded upon the photograph is closer to the truth. The second story, related through the second reconstruction of the event, is horrific. Instead of the story about the seduction of the young boy by a grown woman, a professional in that business, we get the story about the mediation in the recruitment of a boy for a paedophile, positioned in the background of the scene on the quay. And this is not where the story ends, even though the storyteller leads us to believe that that is what the semantic transgression (noise, hermetic quality) is made of. Actually, this is only a pretext for another twist in the narrative situation to be carried out. The black man does not get his object of desire, the boy. The unfulfilled desire prompts a reaction: the middleman who does not carry out the deal successfully to the end must be punished. The middleman is the real victim. The blonde woman turns from a vulture to a carcass, from a hunter to quarry. The black man, the character in the background of the story, is brought to the foreground. In close-up. Large enough to cover everything. The only thing that remains is him: in the photograph, in the memory.

The second story happens in another place, at another time. It is dislocated, out of the quay and into the room, out of reality into the world of art, into the world of photography. It fills the gaps and rectifies the errors of the first story. It is projected upon a different, experienced consciousness with elements of existentiality and fiction, but also elements of mobility. This story is a corrective. It disturbs the order and system of the first story. It changes the meaning. It changes the world. It is like a trope. The sign remains the same, the constellation and the meaning have been changed. The same characters, at the same place, at the same time, with the same gestures but in a completely different semantics, a completely different view of the world, a completely different ethical system of values.

The third story: the movie code/the code of remembrance

The third story suggests an analogy between the movie code and the code of remembrance. It is decoded with the help of the mobile photographs projected like a film and with the help of the *movie of recollection*, instigated by the enlargement of the photographs and their projection on the screen (memory, consciousness, subconscious). This time, there is the allusion of the possibility that Michel took several pictures while leaving the scene of the crime. This story emanates from the repeated reverting to the events of the first and second story. This story is a threefold reconstruction: of reality, of the narrated reality and of the photographed reality. It is not a simple language or a simple narrative. It is a story-revision, a story-interpretation, a story-meta-narration, and even a story of the subconscious. The subconscious is a powerful source of information. The subconscious is a self-absorbed form of memory that re-evaluates all other traces and kinds of recollection. This *cinematic* story is semantically more shocking and aesthetically more intensive because it grotesquely opposes the established order in the interpretation of the events and the first and second stereotype. It is a conflicting story. The meaning is displaced to a symbolical level that, paradoxically, has the power to return the subject to the 'true' reality. In the opening frames of the story, when the identity of the storyteller is meta-fictionally questioned, there is talk about the real storyteller being *dead* and unable to finish the 'translation' (from Spanish) in which the key of the interpretation is hidden.

In the closing frames of the story, again there is symptomatic talk about the storyteller belonging to another time, about him not having any power to change reality, about him remaining appalled in front of the man with black holes for eyes, about the great semantic gap/transgression between the first conception of reality and this one here, this one now, after the film of remembrance, the story of life, has been played.

'Now a big white cloud goes by, just like every day, all of this inexpressible time. What remains to be said always is some cloud, two clouds, or long hours of perfectly clear sky, a clear bright rectangle, pinned to the wall of my room...'
(132)

Is the storyteller alluding to the author who will be dead some day when the story will be read, and is there projection of the author into the storyteller:

‘Therefore, I have to write. At least one of us has to write it down, if the entire thing has to be told. It would be best if I’m the one who does it since I’m dead, and less involved than anyone else; I see only clouds and...’ (117)

In any case, whether we can call that connection autobiographical or not, with a much higher portion of probability we can say that the storyteller-photographer at one point identifies with the boy, that is to say he ‘turns back the film’, deep in the spheres of the unspoken and of the subconscious, where the pictures of the early youth and the traumatic memory of abuse are recorded, of the brutal loss of virginity, mixed with the devil’s slime, with perfumes, emptiness, chaos, cries and tears. The storyteller is ensnared in the *devil’s spider-web*. The boy is caught in the devil’s spider-webs. There’s no one there to help him this time. God is busy with his dreams of the brave world. The ugly world is the world of man. The world defiled by the devil’s slime is man’s world.

The third story has the mark of an autobiography. This autobiographical dimension is discreet, barely visible. Besides, this story is not certain, just as the identity of the storyteller—that is, the boy—is not certain. If elements of analogy between the storyteller and the character of the boy existed, then we could claim with more probability that the story also includes autobiographical elements. This plot integrates the first and the second, with the difference that in this case we are not talking about some unknown boy, but rather about the narrator himself, or we could even say the author if the narrator and the author can be equated. This time the boy becomes the victim of the huge black man, then he becomes neither dead nor alive, rather alive than dead, then he tries to forget, then he turns his life into an attempt at forgetting, into quietness, into silence, until one day, many years later, with the help of a similar event, sight, photograph, film, he opens the locked door of trauma and narrates it in a (coded) story. Then, crying like an ‘idiot’, he remains silent again. Again, oblivion. Unfinished translation. A sentence abandoned mid-way. A lost breath. A taken life. Again the clouds that cover everything, and some unstoppable drops of rain flowing over the picture, ‘some twisted cry’ (132), a feeling of sadness, loneliness and otherworldliness.

4. *The identity of the semantic transgression*

Without this multiple structure of the plot, the discourse of *The Diabolic Spider-Web* would be on the verge of banality. This way, it becomes legitimate as enigmatic and literary. The banal and univocal discourse does not arouse any desire or need for interpretation. In it, comprehension is automatic. But aesthetic discourse cannot be interpreted automatically. It poses questions. A semantic *transgression*, interferences in the understanding exist within it. The aesthetic discourse of the story has several reasons for wanting to be interpreted and for instigating different kinds of interpretation. It awakens a longing for interpretation. That is why interpretation necessarily goes through the circle between the story and the discourse in an open literary and cultural context in which it is deliberated. That is why preliminary interpretations prove to be possible and probable, but not accurate and satisfactory. That is why interpretation changes several times, passing from one story to another, from one discourse/medium to another, from one level of interpretation to another.

Without the unpredictable twists in the course of events, there would be no 'plot', which is the axis of the story. Everything would already be seen, semantically empty, philosophically insignificant, ethically indifferent, aesthetically ineffective. The threshold of expectations—a category related to reading and the reader, introduced with the theory and the aesthetic of reception of Hans R. Jaus and highlighted by Hans G. Gadamer with his theory of a fusion of the horizons—in its essence has been respected as an aesthetically-poetic parameter since the age of antiquity. *The surprise* has been considered to be a constitutive principle of poetics from Aristotle to the Russian formalists and semioticians (complicated meaning and form, noise and so forth). The phenomenon of the story is a phenomenon of a twist in the *re-telling* with semantic implications. Semantic twists are accomplished on the basis of: analogy (metaphor, personification, catachresis and so forth); proximity, touch or contiguity (metonymy, paronomasias); a part representing the whole (synecdoche); contrast (irony, satire, antitheses); contradiction

(oxymoron, paradox, grotesque); hybridization of the sensory perceptions (synaesthesia).

Every story is an authentic form of coding of the arche-story (the mytheme). Interpretation follows the logic of decoding the areas in which the conventional flow of narration is broken. The story is composed of transgressions, noises, knots, turns and twists which the interpreter has to decipher. If the literary text has the arche-structure of a trope, it is perceived on at least two levels: a literal (grammatical) and a figurative (aesthetic, literary) level. That which is represented as a transgression on a grammatical-linguistic level, is re-constituted as a logical signifying configuration of a higher form on a poetic level. Every new meaning is a revision, not an abatement of the previous meaning. In this process of semantic revisions a complex structure of meanings is created, a text full of nuances, a literary word full of enigmas.

The semantic knots in fictional texts represent a contravention of existing aesthetical, ethical, cultural and semantic conventions and values. The ethical, narrative, mythological, aesthetical and cultural transgression generate(s) the story. The interpretation of the story is a search for the literary identities hidden behind the semantic transgressions. Semantic transgression has the power to provoke a change of dominion, to depose a semantically discharged *area* in the text and to achieve the effect of astonishment and shock. The semantic transgression scandalizes the reader. Shocked, the interpreter has to ask what is this, what is the writer trying to say, sometimes to smile, to feel that something is twisting their guts, that something is clouding their view, that the mind is refusing to accept something alluded to as the 'truth', to cross the threshold of the pre-lingual and to articulate *that something* into language. Interpretation is an entrance into the language and a crossing from the precognitive into the cognitive sphere. Interpretation is a necessary condition of humanization.

In the story *The Diabolic Spider-Web* nothing is said unambiguously. The story keeps changing the level of re-telling (narrative, semantic, symbolic, discursive). All of the following are mobile: the story, the narrator, the objective, the observer, the code of perception and of the description of reality. The multiplications complicate the discourse of the story. The original

identities are questioned. The literary identities are constituted in a process of constant revisions. The interpretation of the story is an interpretation of the destabilized and complex identities. Therefore, the interpretation of texts with complex literary identities, like Cortazar's story *The Diabolic Spider-Web*, is a *risky* project. The revelation of the characters represents a particular pleasure, which we will call a hermeneutical pleasure. Faced with the 'limits of the translatability of literary texts, which displays itself with diverse nuances' (H. G. Gadamer, (1991); 218), the interpretative concept will either be confirmed or betrayed or nourished to infinity.

5. Hermeneutical keys

Interpret slowly, says the narrator in *Diabolic Spider Web*, don't take anything 'for granted', don't hasten and don't make quick replies (like the French do, says the narrator with irony, 128)! Proceed slowly and carefully through the semantic jungle of the story. There is a key for everything, but it has to be discovered. There is a first key. There is a second key. There is some other key. There are *keys for interpretation*. Go back, take another look, enlarge the picture if you have to, change the medium, make a film, quote someone else's text which you are translating or which you have read, remember, find all details that take part in the locking up of the story and its meaning, find the keys, re-compose the story. *The dialogue of interpretations* among literature, photography and film is necessary in the construction of the ethics and the culture of interpretation of the world, and with that in the humanization of mankind. The dialogue of interpretations is an introduction to cultural hermeneutics.

The author of *The Diabolic Spider-Web* on several occasions gives meta-textual, para-textual and other self-referential instructions and from the position of a storyteller warns to reader to go back to what they have already read, to look for a second key in the interpretation, to remember that the answer is contained in the narration itself, although the most difficult thing of all is to choose *how to tell the story*. The information that the reader receives is that the reader must reconstruct the order in the story by themselves, an

order that is deliberately distorted by the author, but also by the *pragma* itself, which is the subject of narration; that the reader must pay heed to the semantic and narrative distinctions in the use of personal pronouns (*I, you, him, we, her*), to the place and time adverbials, because depending on the context they can signify different things (*here* and *now*, on the quay, on November 7th and at home, in the studio, several days later...), which the author signalizes with the use of italics and the frequent use of (author's) comments placed in brackets. The author's and the commentator's remarks are symptomatic for the interpretation of the story. We get the impression that the reader is deliberately taken back and forth in the story, with the intention of pulling the reader into the hermetic labyrinth of impenetrable meanings. In the story *The Diabolic Spider-Web* nothing is as it seems at first sight, by inertia. Every statement is used in a narrower context, for the story, but also in a broader context—for reality, life, literature, photography, art... For example, Michel loves to tell stories, he likes to go over already-told stories, he likes to fabricate and lie, likes to 'put his nose into other people's business', he is to blame for the literature that is defined as 'unrealistic fabrications' and 'exceptions', 'odd characters' (125). Such is the 'blonde woman' who 'simply invites to fantasizing, leaving perhaps just enough keys to reach the truth' (125).

5. 1. *The hermeneutics of photography*

Within the self-referential speech-inside-the-speech of this story, an impressive poetics of photography has been created. The best way to observe a photograph is 'face to face', when 'the eyes repeat the position of the lens' and *the view of the objective/lens* at the moment when the picture was taken. The observer is placed *at the objective's point of view* when looking at the photograph and that is when the pleasure is greatest: 'it is the most perfect way to enjoy in the picture'(128).

The enlargement of the photograph is a *fatal act*, which shows him something that he wouldn't have noticed otherwise: *fatal acts* (129). The photograph is a kind of revenge. It appears to be frozen and dead, but at a certain moment it has the power to bring to life the remembrance of the past

and to connect the intricate threads, to untie the knot, to find the way out of the labyrinth of presumptions and doubts. 'My power lied in a certain photograph, this one here, where they took revenge on me, openly showing me what was going to happen.' (130). In a photograph, reality always behaves differently than in literature. There's always an excess of reality in the photograph that re-evaluates the conception of reality; some discrepancy among events/things that are the subject of the photograph, the photographer and the camera lens. Probably because there is some difference in range, perception and eye, memory and consciousness, time and space, so it seems that the photograph has a better and different memory than the photographer.

'...the photographer is always a kind of replacement for his own view of the world and that other which the camera slyly imposes on him...' (p. 120)

The photograph tells less lies than literature because it is like 'a frozen memory' (127) in which 'nothing is missing—certainly not—not even the emptiness, the true connective tissue of the scene' (128). The photograph frames even the things which the eye/man cannot see and the camera lens/the para-deity *de facto* sees. The photograph interferes in the life of 'others' (129), but sometimes it also does 'good deeds' (it prevents in this case the abuse of the boy and helps him to save himself). But those good deeds are not entirely good because they transform, consecutively or on a different level, into a 'fatal act' which, by saving the 'perfect victim', actually creates another, unforeseen 'misfortune' (129) or 'crime' (130) or a horrifying 'game that has been played'. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. The victim is unavoidable: if not the boy, then it is going to be the woman! *And who was the boy? He is it, he, I, and we...*

The photograph is not just a form of memorizing, but also a form of interpretation, different from the literary and cinematic. It can aid the hermeneutics of literary texts. It has its own code that gives an additional impulse for the recognition and understanding of the code of a certain literary text or an event in reality. 'My power lied in a certain photograph, this one here, where they took revenge on me, openly showing me what was going to happen. Life is brought into question. The photograph is taken, time passed since then; we were so far from each other, the crime is done, and *everything*

else are presumptions and sadness' (130). The photograph is something more than memory. The photograph is a paradigm of the creation of the world. The semantic conflict between the plot in the photograph and the one in the story is the basis of the hermeneutics of *The Diabolic Spider-Web*.

5. 2. The hermeneutics of inter-textuality and inter-mediality

The story *The Diabolic Spider-Web* can also be interpreted in correlation with the story *Apocalypse in Solentiname*, written at a later date. In these two stories by Cortazar, *the relation between storytelling, photography and film* is brought into question: in what way does a story narrate, as opposed to photography and film? This is owing to the fact that *The Diabolic Spider-Web* was the basis for the movie *Blow-Up* by Michelangelo Antonioni, which is a version of *The Diabolic Spider-Web*, while the story *Apocalypse in Solentiname* is a response to the movie *Blow-Up* by Michelangelo Antonioni. It is true that the movie had the power to provoke Cortazar into writing another story with a similar subject, but with a completely different plot. In the story *Apocalypse in Solentiname* it is said decisively that the first story by Cortazar *The Diabolic Spider-Web* has a new title and is now called *Blow-Up*. The story *Apocalypse in Solentiname* broadens the context in a political sense and evokes situations from Latin America with a political background (*the story and the memory* about military dictatorships). This story is the author's retort and an interpretation of the previous story *The Diabolic Spider-Web*, but also an implicit retort to Michelangelo Antonioni's film. The story becomes an area of meta-fictional dialogues. Art and life do not differ greatly, says Cortazar in his new story *Apocalypse in Solentiname*. By this he suggests the possibility of the story *The Diabolic Spider-Web* being interpreted from an auto/biographical perspective.

Film has the power to re-code the event and the discourse. It reanimates the frozen reality of the photograph and brings it closer to reality. The photograph, in comparison to the film, has a more emphatic, self-referential and metaphysical dimension. The reanimated reality in the film is so shocking that the interpreter/translator of reality himself is pulled into the fatal *spider web of the devil*: 'There's nothing left of me, just a sentence in French that will

never be finished, the type-writer that falls to the floor, the chair that screeches and trembles, the fog' (129). The story that follows then resembles a hallucinatory vision, a remembrance awakened in a dream or during the crossing from this world to that other world, where 'an enormous silence that has nothing to do with physical reality' rules, where things come together in some forgotten, personal logic, where the line of oneness among the boy, Michel, the photographer, the translator, the storyteller and the author is drawn. In *that place*, unearthed from the subconscious, the photograph has no power to help *this boy here* as it helped that other boy from the previous story and from the photograph. *This here* is an image from the sub-conscious. The subject that narrates and reminisces turns into the lens of his camera, now immobile and unable to interfere, to make that *small accidental intervention* that will help the boy to run away, to save himself. On the contrary, this boy here is irredeemably ensnared in 'all that mess of devil's slime and perfumes' (131). The identity is dispersed to the maximum. The interpretation is borderline, somnambulistic, moving on the edges like jazz (Toni Morrison).

Life ends, the *translation* is left unfinished. The story remains unspoken, just like the translation, like the quoted sentence by Allende that offers the key to the interpretation of the story ('the second key that is in the internal nature of the difficulties that societies...'). The interpretation, predetermined by the unspoken, remains unspoken itself. Or, vice versa, if it is a true interpretation, it has to find the most suitable presumption in order to fill *the gap* in the text, in the photograph, the film, the memory. The author refuses to remember the narrator. The narrator refuses to remember the author. 'But the man was standing with his face towards me, his mouth slightly open and in it I saw his black tongue quiver, and slowly he was raising his arms bringing them closer in the foreground, for another moment perfectly in focus, and then everything was him, he covered the island, and the tree, and I closed my eyes and started to cry like an idiot' (132). That's it. 'What remains to be said always is some cloud, two clouds...' Everything is like 'a twisted cry' (132): the story by Julio Cortazar, and the tales of Michel, the photographer, the translator, the storyteller (of) Cortazar, the plots of the story and the film.

This grotesque 'comedy' by Cortazar is sad, shocking, disturbing. It is composed of several plots in one perfect story in which the search for the identities of the subjects and of the events is represented as a search for the hermeneutical identity of the meaning. And that identity of the meaning is only a presumption, *enlarged*, possible, logical, but still just a presumption in which we can enjoy, however hermetic it might be, or maybe precisely because of that! Interpretation is one of the greatest delights because it is 'a foretelling of the outcome', because it has elements of a detective genre, because it is a sophisticated mantic, a kind of prediction of the meanings hinted at in literary works, but completed and revealed only during the act of interpretation. 'Everything else is presumptions and sadness.'

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