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# SEMIOTIC ANTHROPOLOGY IN POLAND[1]

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In British and American anthropological literature, the ethnology of Central and Eastern European countries has shared in the plight of descriptions of this part of the world: it was seen as exotic, foreign, remote, a backwater, focused on sideline problems and situated on the periphery of this field of science. This state of affairs has been the case since at least the beginning of the Cold War as the descriptions of the national characters of Eastern Bloc communities, drafted by American scholars (the so-called RAND project; *cf.* Kürti 1996: 12). The ethnography of these countries was automatically aligned with the same categories of description (along the principle of symmetrical reflection) which were applied to the characteristics of these communities. This was, in part, an effect of entirely different research traditions in the subject matter, objectives and methods of these remote parts of the science. The differences of 'cultural wholes' did have a decisive impact on the image of ethnology. Like all these communities, Polish ethnology was perceived as a homogeneous whole, which it never was.

In actuality, the ethnology of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe largely followed a course of development that was different from the theoretical trends that were obtained by Western science. However, in the 1960s and 1970s a structural and semiotic research orientation appeared which, as none before, brought together these two partially separate methodological worlds. From the outset, semiotic methodology was not a formation

[1]In this paper I use the terms ethnology, cultural anthropology and ethnography interchangeably, along with the practice applied throughout the most part of the discipline.

that might be called a 'school,' but other theoretical orientations in Polish ethnology share in this status, too.

Michał Buchowski (1995: 39) wrote several years ago of this ethnology that it is torn apart into thematic and theoretical monads, which are directed by attachment to some traditions of thinking on the perception of the place and importance of fieldwork in research practice, to the kind of interpretation and explication of phenomena performed and to the circle of people who share some ideas on the way in which one does anthropology. In this manner he described the ways in which various 'schools' and 'theoretical orientations' operate in contemporary Polish ethnology and exposed the plight of the field as a whole. The scholars who fall into the same category of 'anthropologists' disagree even on such fundamental issues as the subject of research, with its objectives and methods changing repeatedly throughout its history, which, incidentally, is a normal process within humanities. However, this accounts in part for its 'generalism,' that is clearly dangerous for the discipline. Vincent Crapanzano asks a blatant question: Why should we assume that cultural — social — anthropology has any unity other than through an administratively driven economy of knowledge? Why should we assume that unity is desirable? (Crapanzano 1995: 420) He continues to provide an answer that to reduce anthropology to one type of practice is to lose touch with reality. Another anthropologist adds that it is just a community of representations that have been shaped by history and geopolitics, with its partakers choosing its different areas (Ota 2002: 62).

Is semiotic anthropology an exception in being unaffected by the disease of 'vagueness' of its objectives, subject matter and method? Most certainly, the adjective 'semiotic' determines its theory and practice in more detail, albeit imperfectly. We realize the difficulty in the definition of the term 'semiotics' and reconciling the two traditions of de Saussure and Peirce, as well as its inclusion in the anthropological practice still under way which, in the many local traditions, has various objectives and expectations. However, within 'Polish semiotic ethnology' there is consensus on what anthropology is. In paraphrasing Peirce, it could be said that semiotic anthropology has as its starting point some habitual manners of thinking and behavior (quality of being self-evident) and sets out to discover the rules of arriving at convictions in some communities. This is how a number of scholars define anthropology: they see it as systematic critique and reflection of common representations — common ways of understanding the mechanisms of life (Geertz 2003: 47; Herzfeld 2001: 12; Robotycki 1995: 232; Stomma 2002: 9). Because common knowledge makes the world (life) transparent and unambiguous, 'critique'

gives easy answers, catering to popular demand and needing no agreement with facts but relying solely on its inner logic. According to the famous saying by Boon, the task of anthropology is making what is foreign more of your own and making what is your own more foreign. Surely, anthropology does not do that for the sake of aesthetic pleasure but, rather, for understanding, which he equates — as do all semiotically oriented anthropologists — with translation.

Semioticians disagree with a substantial part of the ethnological community, who (whether 'traditional' ethnographers or postmodernists) are in favor of the need for symmetry between the reality and its description. One of the tokens of the love of this symmetry is a naturalist view of description being independent from interpretation — the transparency of the language of description. Another manifestation of this attachment is a common opinion that the use of complicated research is necessitated by the degree of complication in the reality which is the subject of description and interpretation — the more complex the reality the more sophisticated the procedure has to be. So, a description unaccompanied by interpretation is considered sufficient if the reality is simple (obvious) in the scholar's opinion (traditional ethnography), but when the reality is more complex, it needs the use of an interpretative procedure that is at least as sophisticated as itself (postmodernism, phenomenology); in the latter case the reality's non-cohesion and its non-self-evident quality is reflected symmetrically in the language and interpretative procedure being fragmentary and non-self-evident. Symmetry is in both cases not only a diagnosis but also a way in which the cultural reality is to be made sense of, but it is also a scholarly directive[2].

[2]Symmetry is sometimes posited as a directive of investigating phenomena "in their proper context," which only creates appearances of postulating a contextual description of cultural phenomena — it can be seen in the following example. Janusz Barański (1992) confronted two scholarly approaches — a phenomenological one by Z. Benedyktowicz and a structuralist one by L. Stomma — and attempts to refute the charge of 'methodological totalitarianism,' which Stomma leveled against the former, but to no avail. Worse still, by way of defending phenomenology, he himself exposes himself to a similar charge. The confrontation occurs through the 'elephant metaphor' (this model shows the way in which cultural, particularly religious, phenomena are investigated, is well-known in Polish ethnology). According to 'phenomenologists' an elephant (i.e. a religious phenomenon) is supposed to be investigated 'on a scale commensurate with itself.' The scale — devised using a key, which is only known to phenomenologists (including Barański) — is a zoological one (with a religious one applied to religious phenomena). This seems self-evident. But, according to structuralists, an elephant (a religious phenomenon) can be investigated on various scales that are compatible with

Semiotic anthropology as an 'art of translation' asks not about the nature of this world and does not pose ontological questions, though it is not rid of this type of undertaking; it asks not what the reality is (such questions go beyond anthropology). Anthropologists ask what the truth is for 'these people' in this local situation. This is why the 'presumed' discovery by postmodernist anthropology that 'ethnography is fiction' (in the sense that it generates the image of the world rather than simply reflecting it), will not arouse a revolution in the semiotic community because a translation always occurs between semiotic systems (a reduction is always necessary here), rather than between semiotic systems and a reality independent from those.[3] The process of translation (multiple and multi-stratum) occurs in anthropological practice: it is part of fieldwork, where the experience of the researcher gets transformed into a 'note from fieldwork', which in turn serves as basis for the writing of a monograph or paper.

Translation as a 'base metaphor' that determines what semiotic anthropology is, as well as a basic directive on what it should be, demands that a scholar be detached from the reality they investigate. This critical detachment has been called the 'ironical attitude' (a view from far away) in anthropology. This is some distance that is supposed to hold regarding our own cultural truths and those which the professional culture of the discipline equips us with. Polish semiotic ethnology was here inspired by the prominent Polish scholar Jan St. Bystroń, who wrote in *Komizm*:

a cultural interpretative framework, which in a given context equips the elephant (a religious phenomenon) in meaning. The elephant belongs to the world of cultural taxonomy (the world of fauna is also a semantic domain, a cultural artefact of the western world), and this creates an extensive network of relations between its elements, where, depending on the context of 'usage,' different types of relations and different parts of meaning are given preferential treatment (so, not necessarily a 'zoological scale' in the case of an elephant or a 'religious scale' in the case of religion). In a phenomenological view, there is a scale that is privileged by NECESSITY (a 'proper' one), whereas for structuralists the preference is just 'whimsical social acceptance, which means that elements of culture are not self-evident' (Stomma, after Barański 1992: 20). So, explaining a religious phenomenon in a constrained, predetermined context appropriate to it (above cultural taxonomy, beyond semantics and culture pragmatics) is a 'methodological totalitarianism' — a hermetic desire to reflect the reality in the language of the description of this reality, as the preference given to the meaning is not a function of culture but one that is given by necessity.

[3]In the lecture that closes the semiotic conference commemorating Yuri Lotman (Tartu 2002), Alexander Pyatigorsky confirmed that any applications of semiotics can only pertain to culture alone — that which man has created. Paraphrasing Levi Strauss, he said that 'there is no raw, only cooked' for semiotics.

> Obviously, I have no illusions and realize that a great number of readers will treat this book as a collection of more or less exhilarating stories and funny concepts. Let that be! If the theory turns a failure, let it at least be useful in this unintended capacity. There are so many books around the world, with most dignified titles, which do not even provide this benefit[4]

In his famous parodist paper on the bizarre bodily rituals of the Nacirema people[5], another great forerunner of 'anthropological self-irony', Horace Miner derides the formalized tendency by scholars to theorize about everyday phenomena. However, instead of sheer mockery of how easily scholars get deceived by their knowledge, Miner proposes a serious epistemological question: why should the assumed rationality of the western lifestyle fail to be targeted by an anthropologist's sardonic look (Herzfield 2001: 2)? In the 1970s, anthropology itself was included in the term 'lifestyle.'

What constitutes an anthropological approach, then, is the skill of critical thinking not only about the 'subject' of our research but also of the description and interpretation tools (professional culture). This fact has been appreciated by the greatest American semiotic anthropologist M. Herzfeld (2001: 5) when he wrote:

> While I am cautious about the risk of inflated ideas about what the discipline can do for the world at large, I would also argue that – at least in the classroom, hardly an unimportant place, but also in all the other arenas of opinion formation to which anthropologists have access from time to time - there is great value in the destabilization of received ideas both through the inspection of cultural alternatives and through the exposure of the weaknesses that seem to inhere in all our attempts to analyze various cultural worlds including our own. We need such a counterweight to the increasingly bureaucratic homogenization of the forms of knowledge.

[4]Quoted after Ludwik Stomma, from the entry of his making on "Jan Stanisław Bystroń " in Benedyktowicz et al. 1980-1981: 49.. [trans. L.K.]

[5]Which, read in reverse order, betrays the proper subject matter of description.

Czesław Robotycki (1995: 232) similarly claims that nowadays "there is a need for self-consciousness that by participating in the sustenance of the world of values one creates cultural fiction. Its evocation (of self-consciousness, not fiction — *M.B.*) that is the task of critical ironicists." Also, the ironical attitude involves semiotic anthropologists' mistrust in 'universals[6]' and sweeping statements.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1996: 5) perfectly illustrated the difference between the scholarly approach by a semiotically-oriented anthropologist, creating the so-called 'thick description' (Clifford Geertz 2003), and a folklorist using ready-made interpretative calques, which he trusts more than local experience. In Brazilian and South American districts of poverty around big cities there are widespread stories about hunting children and poor people for 'spare parts for the body.' Alan Dundes, a great American folklorist, immediately spots in it an archetypal pattern of a mythical story, circulating in various parts of the world, that is, something that hardly goes with local conditions and lifestyles, power relationships and cultural representations of people who pass these stories on ('look from far away'). Sheper-Hughes notes that the stories are strongly related with the environment where they function, and that this apparent similarity creates an illusion of their sameness in different parts of the world. In her opinion, they not only betray a reluctance to new technologies or a fear that these have gone too far, but above all they testify to social retardation, maltreatment and exploitation of the poor in medical practice: she demonstrated examples of the bodies of the poor being buried in the wrong graves or going missing in cemeteries, which makes it impossible for the family of the deceased to honor the dead by visiting the cemeteries and saying prayers at the tomb, but the corpses are also misidentified and go missing in hospitals and clinics. Illiterate people who remain 'anonymous' or have their given names created from some insignificant localities on the map, are doomed to remaining unknown, abandoned, negligible. When they die in hospitals, their bodies are taken over by the state, and therefore the slums people are petrified of hospitals and dying there, particularly for fear that the autopsies there are just about an acquisition of 'spare parts for the body' as payment in kind for state health care. People are convinced that it is only after death that their bodies become valuable, and therefore the stories about stealing worthless people

[6]Though it is a negative example, Anna Wierzbicka's research on universal semantic metalanguage is of great support to anthropologists' theses; these imply that only upon its completion will any valid and reliable cross-cultural comparisons be possible. So far, such a prospect seems very remote, if not outright utopian.

for the sake of their organs are part of a complex socio-cultural situation in which they find themselves, rather than some universal inventory of a folklorist.

To understand the essence of Polish semiotic ethnology, centered around a group of scholars from the so-called New Polish Ethnology[7], one more introductory remark is necessary: until the mid-1970s the dominant research paradigm was one described as positivistic or modernistic, in line with which the role of ethnography was reduced to recording and describing the transformations in folk culture because in the system of 'people's democracy' attempts were made to present folk culture as more valuable in it being a carrier of truly human and national values. Also, ethnography was perceived as a science investigating the palpable world of material, social and spiritual facts where direct observation and 'testimonies' by the interviewees were the evidence of the authenticity of facts that were 'merely' being described. (*cf.* Buchowski 1995: 41).

This type of thinking was opposed in the late 1970s and the early 1980s by a group of the then young scholars with structural and phenomenological affinities — their 'new tribe' (voluntary adherence, flow of membership, relative transience of ideas and no strict center of power) who described themselves as the New Polish Ethnology [hereinafter: NPE] remains until this day probably the most interesting, original and inspiring phenomenon of Polish ethnology.

Two orientations surfaced within it immediately: 1. structuralist-semiotic and 2. phenomenological-hermeneutic. The first of these points to the myth-creating nature of thinking and the role it plays in history (Stomma, Tomicki); it borrows from three theoretical traditions: French structuralism and semiotics (Levi-Strauss, Barthes, New History) (Stomma), British structural anthropology (Leach, Dougless, Turner) (Wasilewski) as well as the Tartu school semiotics of culture (Lotman, Uspensky, Toporov, Ivanov); it could thus be said that structural semiotics is dominant[8].

[7]The leaders of the group were from the very beginning: Ludwik Stomma, Jerzy Wasilewski, Czesław Robotycki, Ryszard Tomicki and Zbigniew Benedyktowicz. The latter is the main exponent of 'Polish phenomenological ethnology.'

[8]Mikhail Lotman, son of Yuri Lotman (well known in Poland), from the Tartu Institute of Semiotics still calls the 'semiotic of culture' done by the Tartu-Moscow school a 'structuralism from Tartu' (Lotman 2000: 24); this affinity is recognized by Polish semiotic ethnology, which only slightly strayed from the type of structural analysis proposed by Claude Levi-Strauss (see Piątkowski 1993, Stomma 1980, Wasilewski 1980), and which virtually disregarded the possible applications of, say, Peirce's semiotics.

Today, the researchers associated with this 'revolution' are beginning to head Polish ethnology, not only by chairing university departments but also by being classics in the field.

The manifesto of this community from the early 1980s read s that these researchers shall:

1. abandon positivist[9] and post-positivist orientations in ethnology for the sake of systemic descriptions, for which the starting point is mental and conceptual categories in a given culture, rather than imposed subjective scholarly categories;

2. apply a coherent and consistent conceptual-methodological apparatus which stresses the notional side of cultural phenomena;

3. focus in their research on the system of the so-called spiritual culture (rituals, religiosity, mythology, folk literature, cultural identification, etc.), as they have accepted that it is in the sphere of the spirit, the ideational sphere of culture that mechanisms should be sought which control the totality of cultural behavior and phenomena;

4. abandon random descriptions of the phenomena of culture, which had been forced, as it were, by formal pseudo-classification (unrelated to the way in which the culture is classified by those under investigation), and focus on synthesizing and interpretative work designed to reveal the *longue durée* structures, regardless of whether or not those exist as universal cultural laws as the grammar of culture, that is, a set of basic opposites, upon which cultural practices are being superimposed (here: Stomma);

5. advocate interdisciplinary approaches, understood as multi-faceted use and assimilation of contemporary achievements of relative disciplines, chief of those being history, semiotics, religious science, science of literature and linguistics (*cf.* Benedyktowicz *et al.* 1980-1981: 47).

[9]The term 'positivism,' which in Western anthropological literature is more commonly referred to as 'modernism,' is a by-product of the discussion that swept across Polish ethnology in the 1980s and 1990s and what it really means is gullible realism — an approach that prefers the researcher's point of view; its constitutive parts are rationalism that transcends the boundaries of cultures or objectivity, unshaken by one's own cultural system and as transparent as the reality described.

Nowadays, these scholars stress the interpretative[10] character of the ethnological profession. However, this means they realize that an ethnologist constructs initial data (is the semiosis of the culture being investigated) by way of their own cultural tools, including those which professional anthropological culture equips them with, and thus ethnology is a sort of culture critique (having an axiological bias). However, as opposed to American researchers, semiotic ethnologists do not fetishize the fact, and do not suffer from 'moral hypochondria' (Geertz (1998) or D'Andrade (1995)), which manifests itself in a greater commitment on the part of the author in the first person rather than in that which was supposed to be the subject of their research and interpretation. The 'ethnography of ethnography' is for them just a necessary component part of an internal epistemological debate, but it does not make any daunting impact on the research practice. Sometimes it accidentally exposes a 'taboo' of professional ethnological culture, as is the case with the deliberations by Zbigniew Libera (1995c) on the cultural image of an 'arse.' The subject matter appeared so inappropriate that it was subjected to some inner censorship[11] of sorts that eliminated from the research practice any topics considered to be 'inelegant' — it was a kind of transfer of what was obvious in one's culture to the language of ethnology, unaware that such a procedure was being performed.

In this context it was postulated that anthropology was a reinterpretation (Robotycki 1995). This is an interesting suggestion, at least for some part of the discipline (reinterpretation of itself as cultural/textual practice), and it is actually under way already. Zbigniew Libera (1995a) carried out a reinterpretation of the output of 19$^{th}$ century ethnography, showing it as some kind of literary rather than scientific practice (even though materials in folk ethnology were long deemed the most reliable in ethnography), and used ready-made literary calques in the descriptions of country people — it shifted the role of this ethnology from the supplier of data to the object of ethnographic research. Also, ethnographers are attempting to raise issues that were ignored or misinterpreted by previous methodological approaches. On the other hand, semiotic anthropology has always been a reinterpretation — a secondary interpretation of some other interpretation (Geertz 2003: 45).

[10]In this case the point is stressing the fact that ethnography, even at the level of description, is interpretation.

[11]The topic was recognized too low for the thesis to be considered a habilitation dissertation; one dreads to think of ways in which famous folklorists would be treated: Alan Dundes wrote great works on scatology whereas Sigismund Freud's salaciousness far exceeded Libera's moderate effort.

The interest of the NPE and its successors is mainly focused on contemporary phenomena, such as ones of popular culture, using in its appeal mythical structures of thinking, the functioning of these structures in common knowledge (advertising, film, popular and children's literature, school textbooks, music, architecture). But within its interest is also folk medicine, the body as a socio-cultural construct, gesture and history as an area of permanent semiosis[12] as well as mythicized awareness of ethnology itself, that is, the processes of fetishization (reification) of the metalanguage of ethnology. Its research also focuses on the ideological implication of norms and attitudes, cosmological-ritualistic visions of the world and issues of cultural myth-making in the own-alien relations (the traditional discourse on local and national differences has expanded to include AIDS, aging, disease). Also, there is research in the process of the stereotypization of culture, which equally affects professionals and those who deal with culture as a hobby (museums, academic institutions) (*cf.* Robotycki 1995: 234).

Methodological directives that these researchers conform to are directives that are present within all the structuralist-semiotic traditions mentioned, the most important being that 1. explaining culture through culture (Libera 1995c: 17) leads to a search of an inner logic of culture, even though — once detected — it often served as a secondary rationale for the theses or explanations (*cf.* Libera 1995c: 18); 2. concerning the relationship between data and evidence in ethnology, a. a coherent conceptual apparatus of the discipline needs to be applied so that its concepts will not be reified (and thus make the reality being investigated mythical); b. natural language[13] has the status of ethnographic data; here, these researchers stress the descriptive and classificatory character of natural language that is reflected in the semantic structure of words — therefore linguistic data still play an important part in their investigations, particularly in semantics, and they enable a reconstruction of cultural classification schemes as well as social functions of the phenomena being studied (Libera 1995c: 27)[14].

[12]Edmund Leach once wrote that it is not worthwhile to investigate what really happened and what is a myth, but a question should be asked why some facts, true and false, were remembered while others — though true — were forgotten.

[13]On the other hand no attachment has developed to the concept of the primary system and secondary semiotic systems, such as in making an assumption, after Toporov and Zolotaryev, in a series of texts about the body and, in particular about the image of the body as a microcosm, that in man's relationship with this world, it is man and the body that are the models.

[14]As Libera puts it: "The definitions of bodily parts perpetuate what is relevant and eliminate what is redundant. Thanks to that, language gives an account of what a

The starting point for ethnological research is fieldwork, where the reality under investigation becomes textualized (semiosis) — what is not an ethnological text turns into one that becomes analyzed[15]. Semiotic analysis in ethnology serves several purposes:

1. extracting sensible wholes (signs) from a given text of culture[16],

2. investigation of the relationships between:

**(a)** extracted wholes within a text of the culture where these belong (syntactic, semantic and pragmatic relations); here we ask:

– why do some signs play an important role within a given text of culture?

– why were some signs selected from the inventory of possible signs?

– what is the significance of these signs?

– what is their potential meaning? What are their potential variants within the given culture (analysis of symbolic), realized in a given context (analysis of homological relationships)?

– why was this meaning chosen rather than some other, with the meaning of the part having been confronted by the meaning of the whole (the context of the whole — an analysis of systemic reactions) (cf. Stomma 1980: 130-132)?;

**(b)** semiotic systems that create an intra- and supra-textual context of a phenomenon being investigated thanks to which we acquire knowledge of the meaning of the particular parts of the text as a whole (Stomma 1980; Wasilewski 1980).

In recent years, Polish scholars have creatively contributed to the work on the concepts of TEXT and MYTH, which are fundamental for semiotics. In his most recent work, Czesław Robotycki (1998), influenced by deconstruction, revises the concept of a text of culture and replaces it with NARRATION. The reason for the change is simple: the term better corresponds to a situation in which "the world makes no attempt to communicate anything to us," is a steady narration without framework delimiting its reach (which is the case with a text). Framework is an artifact of culture. He writes

given body part is, what it does, and allows a distinction and association of different body parts" (Libera 1995c: 21).

[15]As this is a complex process, its description goes beyond the bounds of this paper.

[16]It is customary to see the treatment of cultural phenomena as texts, as a condition of their comprehension, translation.

that "it is us who make sense of history" (1998: 11) with the word 'history' to be substituted with anything at all that is governed by semiosis.[17] Also, the concept of 'TEXT' has become banal by overuse, by being exploited in so many contexts that we hardly recognize it as text, with the only reason for its functioning being some peculiar intellectual fetishism that is hard to grasp.

The concept of myth and mythical thinking is now being subjected to modification, although it remains a universal explanatory category, the most effective interpretative tool for a broad spectrum of cultural phenomena, a professional anthropological culture category of a self-evident nature. Zbigniew Libera (1995b: 11), in his works on folk medicine and body anthropology, modifies Roland Barthes' proposition, whose staunchest advocate in the Polish context is Ludwik Stomma, that "myth is stronger than facts" or that "myth seeks congruity with sense rather than with a sensuously perceived reality." Stomma writes that "myth-making products have no relationship to reality, which cannot verify them," "experience is less significant than myth and must concede in confrontation with myth" and provides arguments that support the proposition. As exemplified by 'folk medicine,' Libera demonstrates that the effectiveness of a number of medical procedures is not purely accidental, which Stomma's logic-over-practice proposition (abstracted from real life) would imply, but that it also has its empirical origin. Medicine does not lend itself to a reduction into myth as the experiments of myth are not the same as the experiments of folk medicine, which do not occur in an abstracted space of purely logical operations. If it were so, any treatments could be applied to any medical conditions as long as they fulfilled the requirements of this logic. Libera postulates that conviction-practice relationships be excluded from the scope of the extractable domain of culture (here Libera remains loyal to the term 'text of culture') though recognizing their mythological basis, so that this area as an element of a greater, sensible and coherent whole, that is, the picture of the world of a given community. This allows him to embrace a proposition that different texts of culture realize the same paradigm of sense and have a shared inventory of meanings, which is not to say that semiotic systems are synonymous: they always retain some autonomy (Libera 1995b: 12).

The concept of myth retains a principle that myth is about an inversion

[17]Here, semiotic ethnology gets dangerously close to the 'ideals' of postmodern and naturalistic anthropology with their zeal for the quest of symmetrical ways of reflecting the reality.

of the orders of culture and nature — demonstrating, on the one hand, social, ideological, historical creations as natural but, on the other, representing the direct products of socio-cultural relationships and the associated moral, aesthetic complications, as well as those related to class and ideals, as originating *per se;* this leads to their being recognized as 'good laws,' 'the voice of public opinion, 'norms,' and noble principles — innate things, given by nature (Stomma in Benedyktowicz et al 1980-1981: 48). Effective interpretations of a number of phenomena of the contemporary culture (advertising, political or economic discourse, history and science) are still being carried out within Polish semiotic ethnology on the basis of this definition of myth. The authors from the NPE, while pointing to a symbolic character of culture and the plurality of the manners of semiosis (history, traditions, local and regional identities) and the antinomies generated by these processes, permanent and continually overcome, not only show the process of semiosis as a continuous process that does not know a simple reproduction of patterns, but they also indicate myth as the main source of an overcoming and reduction of the unlimited possibilities of semiosis.

An example from Libera (1995b: 98):

> Partakers of culture endeavor to impart a mythological sense on everyday reality. First, 'real' properties of things are taken into account (so perceived by the 'spectacles' of the culture) and their selection are dictated by practical use. Next, the existing choice is subjected to additional selection motivated by the logic of myth. Ultimately, pragmatism has a purely mythological sense as ritual comes to include only that which is 'real' from the standpoint of myth. Thus, in overlaying a specific situation, rituals corroborate the agreement of common experience with the sacral image of the world. [trans. L.K.]

A partaker of culture, in their intimacy with texts that render themselves to being read in a number of ways, tries to neutralize (muffle) the effect of paradox by mythicizing reality. In their demythicization (semiotic anthropology, as understood by the NPE, sets out to reveal the rules that govern a text of culture) an anthropologist re-codes the contents of the mythicized passages of culture along the terms of their own practice, following professional anthropological culture.[18] *bricoleur*). The process of transforming

[18] One more remark: for ethnologists, the subject of interest and interpretation

available data into a document that goes on to be interpreted can be called 'entextualization' (by Greg Urban, 1996). This process always means a reduction or selection, but if we want to understand anything from the reality in question, there is no choice — either 'oppression of depression,' as the latter means there is nothing that can be understood or written. Lotman (1999) (and, earlier, Sławiński 2000), points to the fact that understanding needs a common ground (borderline area) which will serve as an arrangement of translation (shared code elements) and the bulk of an anthropologist's effort, such as local fieldwork, is focused on the creation of this common ground (*cf.* Rabinov 1977). This is where the 'moral hypochondria' manifests itself, and it is instantly transformed by the NPE into an element of controlling the present practice. These scholars do not share the modernist or positivist view implied in the 'moral oversensitivity' that translation is supposed to reflect or copy; on the contrary — it must deform and distort in order to be able to understand that which is the subject of the translation. One needs to come to terms with that and practice interpretation. Otherwise we would be left with enslaving and inactivating moral anxiety or a restoration of the myth 'science as a reflection of nature;' worse still, we would abolish the distance between the researcher and the subject of research, which is a condition of anthropological cognition. The NPE does not manifest in suicidal drives, even if it is slowly dying.

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