

Civilised Men, Monstrous Cyclopes, and Troglodytes in Modern Imaginary Voyages Set in Classical Antiquity (Schwob, Moravia, Beneş, Borges)

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Abstract:

The question of civilisation versus barbarism underpins most of the popular subgenre of the imaginary voyage usually known as lost-world romance. The lost-world romance has approached the opposition of the ignoble versus noble savage in a variety of ways. One of them has consisted in transferring this opposition to classical antiquity, the period when the very concept of civilisation was born in the Western world, often against the background of the existence of the allegedly savage other (e.g. Cyclopes, Troglodytes). This kind of speculative fiction with imaginary ancient Greek or Roman voyagers can be classified in two main subgenres. The first one is composed of modern re-writings of Odysseus' myth in order to update it to modern concerns, especially totalitarian barbarism, in stories such as Alberto Moravia's "La verità sul fatto di Ulisse" (1940). Another, more original subgenre, consists of narratives where an ancient civilised is confronted to mentally monstrous populations, such as the females troglodytes from Marcel Schwob's "Les embaumeuses" (1891), the devolved immortal troglodytes from Jorge Luis Borges' "El inmortal" (1947), or the prehistorical inarticulate hominids from V. Beneş's "Amo, amas, amat" (1943). These authors avoided giving clear and reductive answers to the question of civilisation versus barbarism as these terms appear respectively embodied in classic antiquity travelers and in the (un)communities of monsters they encounter in the framework of this interesting, but critically neglected genre of mythological/archaeological imaginary voyages.

Key words: Civilisation, barbarism, ancient imaginary voyagers, Schwob, Moravia, Borges, Beneş.

Resumen:

La cuestión de la civilización frente a la barbarie subyace a la mayor parte de la ficción de mundos perdidos, que es un subgénero popular del viaje imaginario. Este tipo de ficción ha reflejado la oposición entre el hombre civilizado y el mal salvaje de formas variadas. Una de ellos consiste en transferir esta oposición a la antigüedad clásica, el período en que nació el concepto mismo de civilización en el mundo occidental, a menudo en el contexto de los contactos de viajeros imaginarios con razas humanas alternativas supuestamente salvajes (por ejemplo, cíclopes y trogloditas). Este tipo de ficción especulativa protagonizada por viajeros imaginarios antiguos griegos o romanos puede dividirse en dos subgéneros principales. El primero se compone de reescrituras modernas del mito de Odiseo para ajustarlo a las preocupaciones modernas, en especial la barbarie totalitaria, tal como se puede observar en ficciones como «La verità sul fatto di Ulisse» (1940), de Alberto Moravia. Otro subgénero, más original, lo forman las historias en las que una persona civilizada antigua se enfrenta a poblaciones mentalmente monstruosas, tales como las mujeres trogloditas de «Les embaumeuses» (1891) de Marcel Schwob, los trogloditas inmortales degenerados de «El inmortal» (1947) de Jorge Luis Borges, o los homínidos prehistóricos sin lenguaje articulado de «Amo, amas, amat» (1943) de V. Beneş. Estos autores evitaron dar respuestas claras y reductoras a la cuestión de la civilización frente a la barbarie tal como esos términos aparecen encarnados, respectivamente, en los viajeros clásicos de la antigüedad y en las (anti)comunidades de monstruos que encuentran en el marco de este género tan interesante, aunque poco estudiado, de los viajes imaginarios de tipo mitológico o arqueológico.

Palabras clave: civilización, barbarie, viajeros imaginarios antiguos, Schwob, Moravia, Borges, Beneş.

1. *Lost-world romance and the primitive, monstrous other*

The question of civilisation versus barbarism underpins most examples of the popular subgenre of the imaginary voyage, usually known as ‘lost-world’ or ‘lost-race’ fiction. According to Thomas Clareson, “between the 1870s and the 1930s, by far the most popular kind of imaginary voyage took the form of the so-called ‘lost-race’ novel” (1985: 118). Most of these lost-race or lost-world stories (e.g., H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines*, 1885) have similar plot structures: white European or American explorers heroically overcome, through the use of modern technology and an iron conviction in their own superiority, the obstacles posed by nature and local populations in order to penetrate a secluded place where an ancient civilisation survives, isolated from the course of history as it is from the rest of the world by geography. These scenarios were often inspired by the sensational discoveries made by archaeologists in different parts of the world, but the no less

sensational theories and discoveries made by contemporary palaeontologists were soon also exploited in this kind of fiction.

According to the Darwinian theory of evolution (substantiated by the artefacts and petrified bones having been unearthed in the 19th century by palaeontologists) humankind, civilised or savage, had been preceded by other human species linking ape to man. These hominids had long disappeared, but it was precisely the task of the lost-world romance to reveal in the course of a fictional narrative that those, like other past communities and beings, could have survived in a secluded, still unexplored place on our planet. One of the first influential examples of this evolutionary, missing-link kind of lost-race novel is Jules Verne's *Le Village aérien* (1901), which also hints at the relationship of this kind of fiction with much older Western myths and narratives. In Verne's novel, the scientist/explorer hopes to find "des types étranges" [strange types¹], even "des humains qui n'auraient qu'un œil comme les Cyclopes de la Fable" [humans having a single eye like the Cyclopes of the Fable] (Verne, 1901: 68).

This allusion to the Homeric cyclopes shows that monstrous human alterity was expected in this quest, and that this monstrosity had far older cultural origins than the social-darwinist world-view often underpinning Anglo-American lost-world romances featuring ape-men such as Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, and Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes*, both published in 1912. Cyclopes were certainly not hominids in the modern, evolutionary sense, but they embodied, along with other races described by Pliny the Elder and other ancient geographers and naturalists, what ancient Greeks and their cultural successors considered figures of radical alterity, although still endowed with human-like features and sentience. Barbarians spoke other languages and had other customs, but they were civilised in their own way; Trojans and Greeks were enemies, but not alien to each other in their common human identification. In contrast, cyclopes were one-eyed giants who lived like the animals they tended, and ate human flesh. Their anatomy was somehow human, but not quite. The same could be said of ape-men in late 19th and early 20th century literature, when imperial speculative romance cohabited with portrayals of the ape as a symbol of human degeneracy and monstrosity in the framework of the Decadence. Indeed, the concept of "'monstre' s'applique à la creature qui tient autant de l'homme que du singe" ['monster' is applied to any creature being as much man as ape], and "la constance du qualificatif 'monstre'

1. Since I have not access to English translations of all the quoted works in other languages, all translations are mine. All versions are literal, their sole goal being to offer some assistance in reading the original texts.

dans le contexte exotique, érotique, enclin à l'hybridation quitte le bestiaire pour la tératogonie" [the constancy of the qualifier 'monster' in an exotic and erotic context tending to hybridization quits the field of the bestiary to enter that of teratology] (Stead, 2004: 295), were symptoms of a cultural malaise accompanying European/Western global expansion, when the idea that Europe, especially Latin Europe, was experiencing a moral and civilisatory crisis not unlike the one that had brought about the fall of its political and cultural ancestor, the Roman Empire. In this context, the blurring of the traditional humanist distinction between ape and man, and between man and sentient monster, as well as the morbid remembrance of the vices pervasive in the Ancient Mediterranean world, were metaphors for what was considered sick and perverted in contemporary society. Whereas some left Europe (in fact or by reading exotic romances) in order to find in exotic adventure the moral fibre and pure strength allegedly lacking in refined, but 'decadent' Europe, others symbolically questioned their own modernity by insisting in the barbarism within themselves (Robert Louis Stevenson's Mr. Hyde) and within Western cultural and anthropological heritage.

One of the procedures adopted to do this was to re-write, in a speculative mode, ancient classic narratives, from the *Odyssey* onwards, by showing the inner fragility and essential weakness of the civilised man when confronted, without technology, with the not-quite-human other. Alone and stripped of the mechanical tools supporting Western expansion, 'civilised' man's innate superiority upon the monstrous and/or hominid was not taken for granted anymore. Moreover, not only individual bravery is questioned, but also cultural signs distinguishing civilised man from its savage counterpart, such as fine arts, literature or philosophy, as they had been transmitted through artefacts and the written word, in order to defeat death and oblivion. These cultural endeavours could bring heroes the immortality of fame while it contributed to the collective shaping of civilisation. However, this traditional picture of Western man's ascent up to 19th and early 20th century supremacy appears threatened in decadent, non-conformist lost-world romances and imaginary voyages by the forces of inner and outer monstrosity.

To show the limits of individual heroism and of civilisation itself, some writers refused back then to set their parables in their own time, choosing instead classical antiquity, the period when the very concept of civilisation was born in the West. In this way, they transferred the opposition between civilisation and barbarism to its origin, in order to undermine it from its very historical roots. In doing this, these authors also contributed to the renewal of both historical/archaeological and adventure/speculative fiction through their intimate fusion, in a period when in most of Europe the Decadent movement was not only favouring alternative views of humankind, but also modernising the classic literary heritage by rewriting it

through non-conformist, anti-classic and hybrid discourses in order to overcome genre boundaries and to subvert humanist preconceptions on the greatness of man. In this context, speculative adventure fiction found a new life through its setting in the ancient Mediterranean world, either by recovering the figure of Odysseus himself or of other epic travellers in neo-mythological romances, or by imagining the journeys of Greek or Roman citizens in a more realistic and (pseudo)historical manner, borrowing characters, chronotropes and figures from contemporary historical/archaeological romances set in the Greco-Roman world prior to its full Christianisation. In both cases, the return to the ancient world is instrumental in renovating the imaginary voyage, including its lost-race sub-genre, in both form and contents, as a sample of representative narratives will show. These will be limited to the literatures in Romance languages. In this linguistic/cultural area, this kind of fiction is well-represented by a few tales having sometimes acquired canonical status.

2. *Modern Mythological Imaginary Voyages*

The two main categories in modern imaginary voyages set in classical antiquity in Latin Europe's modern age from the 1870s to the 1950s are the 'mythological' and the fictional 'archaeological'. The first one has been the most popular among writers ever since Dante Alighieri imagined a final journey undertaken by Odysseus after his return to Ithaca in the Canto XXVI of his *Commedia*. Following in his footsteps, some modern Latin European authors have produced narratives in prose (e.g., Émile Gebhart's "Les dernières aventures du divin Ulysse," collected in *D'Ulysse à Panurge*, 1902) and verse (e.g., Arturo Graf's "L'ultimo viaggio di Ulisse," *Le Danaïdi*, 1897, and Giovanni Pascoli's "L'ultimo viaggio," *Poemi conviviali*, 1904) about further sea adventures of the ageing Ithacan hero, still unable to enjoy in peace his retrieved kingdom and wife.² Others have revisited some episodes of that classic epic poem in their narratives, such as Odysseus' encounters with Calypso (e.g., Eça de Queirós' "A Perfeição", 1897; George Topârceanu's mock poem "Chinurile lui Ulise," 1925, collected in *Parodii originale*, 1927), Nausicaa (e.g., Jules Lemaître's "Nausicaa," *Myrrha, vierge et martyre*, 1904), the sirens (e.g., Jules Lemaître's "La sirène," *En marge des vieux livres*, 1905), Circe (e.g., Alberto Moravia's "Ricordo di Circe," 1940), or several episodes in book-length re-writings of Odysseus' journey (e.g., Jean Giraudoux's *Elpénor*, 1919; Agustí

2. Stead has competently surveyed these and other sequels to the *Odyssey* in a landmark bilingual anthology (2009). Other significant works on Odysseus as a character in modern literatures are a book written by Stanford (1968) and a volume edited by Nicosia (2003).

Bartra's prosimetrum *Odisseu*, 1953). Regarding the cyclopes, Giraudoux follows closely the Homeric story in "Le Cyclope" (1908, later incorporated into *Elpénor*), but it portrays Polyphemus mainly as a lover, according to the later myth of Acis and Galathea. Furthermore, he glosses over this cyclops' feelings as if his cave were a contemporary Parisian 'salon.' Love and anthropophagy are adroitly intertwined in order to highlight the irony of the situation but literary grace is pursued and reached, rather than any reflection on the meaning of Polyphemus' monstrosity, otherwise fully absent from Polyphemus' depiction in the tale. In contrast, a cold horror pervades a later treatment of the myth in Alberto Moravia's short story "La verità sul fatto di Ulisse" (first collected in *I sogni del pigro*, 1940), written and published when totalitarianism was at its terrifying apex in Europe and the world.

Against the violence and repression facilitated by the highly developed machinery of the modern State, censorship included, writers subject to totalitarian control from above were prone to using the mode of parable in order to criticise the whole historical and cultural process having facilitated the modern tyranny of the fascist or communist highly regimented state. In this context, Moravia avoided writing a further playful version of the cyclopes' matter by turning them into living symbols of the 'true' bureaucratic nature of modern civilisation as seen through a faithful presentation of the real 'fact.' This truth is the result of a complete inversion of narrative perspective and roles, as well as of the very same rhetorical discourse used for centuries to convey the heroism of Odysseus and his companions. Whereas their adventures in Polyphemus' island had been literarily enhanced through the use of high style of writing, from the epic verse in Homer and Pascoli to the ornamented 'artistic' prose in modern authors such as Queirós and Giraudoux, Moravia eschewed any literary pretence by using the discourse of the administrative, even forensic account. His tale is written, indeed, as if it were a historical text made up of long quotations from an official report, written by an anonymous civil servant as a part of a file on a failed experiment with cattle undertaken by a subject of 'His Cyclopic Majesty.' This subject is none other than Polyphemus himself, who has caught on his land a group of two-eyed beasts never seen before. As Polyphemus has ascertained after having eaten some castaways lost on his beach, these beasts are edible and constitute, therefore, potential additions to cyclopean animal husbandry. By a lucky occurrence, he finds in a cave two scores of them, both male and female. He tries to study them in a scientific manner in order to get to know their habits for securing their breeding and rational exploitation. Unfortunately, the beasts seem unable to thrive in captivity; they even kill each other in some unexplainable frenzy. As a solution, Polyphemus decides to take them into the open, with the sheep, only to find himself blinded by the newly-found creatures. These escape eventually, depriving the official survey from live specimens able

to substantiate Polyphemus' latest claim that those were not animal, but small cyclopes also endowed with reason and free will. This contention is refuted by the cyclopean officials, who blame Polyphemus for not having persisted in using the scientific approach and obtaining the desired results. Despite its seemingly rebellious nature to any rational treatment, they could have been domesticated. What was not to be admitted was their cyclopean nature. Although their only differences with the cyclops were their smaller size, their double eyes, their pinky colour and their lack of fur, they are classed as just 'cycloids' ("ciclopoidi").

Odysseus and his crew are obviously members of humankind, as any reader can readily see, and as Polyphemus finally acknowledges. However, the official view by the civilised cyclops is the opposite. By attributing to the latter some features of the 'hominoid' ape-man, including a body fully covered by hair, Moravia deconstructs the debasing discourses applied in popular fiction to our human ancestors, past or speculative, alive in some unexplored Tarzanian jungle. As it often happens in the fable and science fiction genres, his tale invites readers to adopt a cognitively estranging perspective. Men (and women, since both sexes are represented in this Odyssean crew) are now the animals scientifically studied by the cyclopes, whom most readers would probably see back then as primitive monsters due to their appearance and eating habits. Moravia questions thus the recourse to scientific theories to animalise human, sentient beings, turning them into inferior creatures to be used first, and then destroyed for the sake of the superior interest of the state and of the alleged well-being of the ruling (aryan) race or (proletarian) class. Accordingly, "a figura do cíclope racional que se utiliza dos humanos animalizados mostra humoristicamente a magnitude monstruosa da opressão que reduz o homem a instrumento" [the figure of the rational cyclops using animalised humans humorously shows the monstrous magnitude of the oppression that reduces man to an instrument] (Bosquesi, 2015: 322). Moravia's cyclopes are the 'philanthropic ogre,' as Octavio Paz named the modern state (*El ogro filantrópico*, 1979). They are the true monsters for us, since they eat humans, but their actions are not truly different from those by contemporary humans.

Despite this black picture of modern institutional monstrosity, there is hope, however, since the two-eyed animal "si dimostra supremamente refrattario ad un trattamento razionale e scientifico" [proves to be supremely refractory to a rational and scientific treatment] (Moravia, 2007, 75): mankind will not allow to be rationally exploited by any totalitarian order, cyclopean or otherwise. In Moravia's story the stranded crew, whose ruthlessness is nevertheless highlighted, would not to be suppressed without resistance. Eventually, Odysseus recovers his heroic statute, and reaffirms his powerful and rather tyrannical individuality as a leader who eventually secures his crew's freedom. Paradoxically, classic humanist values are, thus,

recovered and reaffirmed through his figure, which ends by being faithful to the traditional myth. After all, unlike what young, Dadaist Louis Aragon has done in his novel *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (1922), Moravia might not have wished to deny the classic myth as such, but to use it to facilitate the understanding of his parable, at least among a classically educated, relatively wide readership, probably “con l’intenzione di presentare l’eterna validità di alcuni comportamenti e tipi umani” [with the intention of presenting the eternal validity of some human behaviours and types] (Cipriani, 2008: 355) through a story ideally endowed with universal validity. On the other hand, and despite the upgrading of the myth through the infusion of modernist dystopian tropes, the pre-existent and well-known Odysseus’ plot determined to a certain extent what Moravia could tell without estranging readers too much. A plot inversion of a known story is readily recognisable after all and, therefore, facilitates the awareness of the changes introduced by a particular writer in order to trying to secure new and topical readings of the relevant classic legend being revisited.

3. *Archaeological Imaginary Voyages*

A greater novelty than in mythological rewritings of ancient lore can be found in imaginary voyages in which ancient travellers and their adventures are fully invented. Authorial fantasy can then have full authority to create fictional worlds as varied and peculiar as those concocted by the father of the genre, Lucian of Samosata, as shown in his pleasantly deceitful *True History* (*Ἀληθῆ διηγήματα*). However, this freedom has rarely been taken full advantage of. Only the extraordinarily imaginative gallery of lands and races, some of them quite Plinian, described by Han Ryner in *Les Voyages de Psychodore, philosophe cynique* (1903) could rival for its satiric wit and pleasant extravagance of invention the ones described by Lucian himself. This imaginary voyage offers a wealth of such extravagant figures that they often encompass the boundaries of the monstrous. Nevertheless, its literally cynical hero can hardly be considered a representative for civilisation having to deal with barbarians or savages. He is rather a spokesperson for Ryner’s non-conformist ideas about man, society, and the universe. He comments on what he sees, but rarely enters into conflict with the strange beings surrounding him in the unknown lands he visits. As befits a philosopher, he keeps reflecting and talking rather than acting. His adventures are those of (un)reason in an abstract-looking imaginary world only sparsely recognisable as any real one on the Earth, past or present. Ryner’s work is pure speculation, an exciting example of the fictions of free thought.

Other journeys undertaken by ancient Greek or Roman imaginary voyagers in this period were closer to contemporary literary practice than those

undertaken by Ryner's cynical philosopher. In fact, many of the chronotropes of post-*Salammbô* parnassian 'roman antique' seem to have been operative in most of the works here surveyed, from the massive introduction of cultural hints (mainly quotations and allusions to ancient Greek and Latin history and literature) to the attempt at a realistic rendering of classical Antiquity while exploiting the picturesqueness of characters and customs from a more or less marked decadent perspective. These features obeyed the taste, common in that age, for (apparent) historical accuracy as a major condition for the plausibility requested by a wider public, as well as for (orientalist) exotic vistas also quite widely enjoyed in the period. Nevertheless, the fantastic potential of the imaginary voyage was not wasted. On the contrary, the structure of the journey to unknown lands allowed for further liberations from the purely historical romance through the symbolic and the horror/gothic modes. Through genre hybridization, the 'roman antique' acquired, thus, a multi-faceted speculative dimension intended to enrich its meaning beyond the mere cultural charm of the most prestigious ancestor civilisation for Westerners, classical antiquity.

In these narratives, the adventures experienced by ancient heroes in the extraordinary places they visit usually follow a scheme quite similar to the usual in popular lost-world romances, consisting in the confrontation of the civilised to a group or community of beings who are deemed barbaric, savage or even monstrous due to their actions, their appearance or both. On their side, the ancient human travellers, voluntary or not, are usually highly educated members of the Greek or Roman cultured elite. As such, they are well aware of the ancient ethnographic accounts describing barbarian and/or Plinian contemporary populations, as well as of the wealth of strange and often monstrous beings haunting classical mythology according to the poetical fables with which they are perfectly familiar. Indeed, poetry, as well as architectural sophistication, are signs of supreme human(ist) achievements in these narratives. The fact that their ancient characters can rightly appreciate those objects of high civilisation actually defines their personality, since this is shaped by their cultural heritage, whereas the bizarre creatures they usually encounter in their journey are unable to value or to enrich that heritage. Moreover, these creatures are not only representatives of the barbarian and sometimes savage other, but they often are figures of death and physical or mental decomposition, too. They threaten the voyager with an unwelcome return to death or to a mental state akin to death. Against the danger of bodily death and of a spiritual fall into primeval and monstrous unsentience, the classical world had already promoted reason and poetry as means to defeat the anguish of personal disintegration and collective dissolution, as the very story of Odysseus shows. The educated West had inherited those means, as well as the underlying contrast between advanced

civilisation and primitive barbarism.³ Around 1900, however, they seemed being on the brink of losing their relying force when the feeling of modern decline of ‘high’ civilisation eroded traditional certainties, also regarding the power of the word as well as the superiority of reason and of its products, modern science and the industrial, imperial order.

That crisis, which was both philosophical and societal, is reflected in various, but broadly analogous ways in the ‘archaeological imaginary voyage’ in Latin Europe and America, from its beginnings in the Age of Decadence, when Marcel Schwob presented two Roman soldiers and brothers exploring the outer reaches of Libya, in and beyond the lands of the ‘Trogloodytes,’ in the tale “Les Embaumeuses” (1891; *Le Roi au masque d’or*, 1892). After their solitary and dangerous wandering through the desert well beyond the *limes*, they arrive at a city full of domes as well as of niches, a sort of cave city smelling of both perfumes and bodily corruption. These odours correspond to a place devoted to embalming the corpses coming from the whole region. This city of the dead is only populated by women, whose tasks and customs make them look frightening for the two Roman explorers. Although they are well treated upon their arrival, one of them dies poisoned on their very first night there. Soon afterwards, the survivor witnesses how his brother is embalmed by women who might be the ones previously welcoming them. The remaining soldier flees that “contrée de sortilèges” [region of spells] (Schwob, 2002: 270) populated by women even more terrible, such as the famed Thesalian witches. His eventual fate remains unknown, but it should be noted that he does not really try to recover his brother’s body, or to punish the assassins. His escape differs from the imperial explorer’s agency shown, for instance, in Henry Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887) in a similar contact with an alluring witch following the finding of a lost, ancient-looking city. Schwob prefers to suggest the horror of the attempt to stop time through a semblance of bodily immortality undertaken, unlike Ayesha’s quest, as a social endeavour by a group of people who lost their individuality and, seemingly, their humanity in the process. They seem to have absorbed the anonymity of death itself. In their obsession to defeat death through the mere preservation of the bodies, they have given themselves up to a life devoid of everything that makes it

3. “En historisant la différence, en y intégrant le temps (leur présent, c’est notre passé), l’ethnographie romaine, non moins que celle des colonisateurs européens du XIX^e et du XX^e siècle, met en jeu une conception de la culture romaine (*cultus*) comme dynamique d’acculturation et légitime son universalité” [By historicising the difference, integrating time (their present is our past), Roman ethnography, no less than that of the European colonisers of the nineteenth and twentieth century, brings into play a conception of Roman culture (*cultus*) as a dynamic of acculturation, and legitimises its universality] (Cordier, 2006: 178).

worth living. This larval existence is dedicated to repeating the same funeral rites. The beauty of transitory life is thus for ever excluded and, in fact, true life and love are symbolically denied through the soldier's murder. Since those rites and the embalming procedure itself can only be the products of a refined, advanced society, the only one able to concoct them, the city in the tale can also be understood as a metaphor for the horror of the stasis and subsequent degeneration haunting any civilisation which relinquishes the urge for change once it has reached a stage where its common goals are believed to be fulfilled. The illusory quest for immortality through ritual embalming turns its practitioners into instinctual creatures, monstrous witches living in constructed caves similar to those of the Plinian Troglodytes, and spiritually as dead as the corpses they handle. Not even the heroic and probably also handsome soldiers and adventurers can reclaim them for the outer world of the living, a world populated by the searching and the creative human beings still to be found in a still thriving civilisation such as that of ancient Rome in its prime. Those women will ever keep haunting the daunting rooms, staircases and corridors of their urban labyrinth in the mountain. This constructed scenery is described in terms similar to the ominous castles in Gothic literature, here plausibly adapted to its forerunners, the ancient cities of the dead in Egypt and neighbouring regions.

Although its inhabitants seem to find themselves in the opposite predicament than the dead and dead-bearing women ruling the embalmers' city, the beings vegetating in and around Jorge Luis Borges' City of Immortals ("Ciudad de los Inmortales") described in "Los inmortales" (1947; later entitled "El inmortal" when included in the collection *El Aleph*, 1949) can be considered further symbols of the failure of both their classical civilisation and, again, of immortality after having truly achieved it. Given Borges' confessed admiration for Schwob, whose *Vies imaginaires* (1896) he had emulated in *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935/1954), it seems likely than Borges could have got some inspiration from "Les embaumeuses" for the setting and the story in "El inmortal," although the resemblance of its situation and setting with some stories by H. P. Lovecraft, namely "The Nameless City" (1921) and "At the Mountains of Madness" (1936), makes likely that Borges knew of them.⁴ There are also other similar tales on ancient symbolic cities such as Bernard Lazare's "La vie sans effroi" (1891; *Le Miroir des légendes*, 1892) and Francisco Navarro Ledesma's "La ciudad eterna"

4. According to Abraham, "numerosos rasgos de 'El inmortal', especialmente la descripción de la Ciudad de los Inmortales, derivan de diversos relatos de Lovecraft (especialmente de la novela *At the Mountains of Madness*)" [numerous features of 'The Immortal,' especially the description of the City of the Immortals, are derived from several stories by Lovecraft (especially from the novel *At the Mountains of Madness*)] (2005: 62).

(1902).⁵ Borges' is, however, a more complex work regarding its literary technique. Its sophistication could be, indeed, one of main reasons for its undisputed canonical status in world literature, as it is suggested by the large amount of critical attention it has received up to the present day. Although much of this criticism often seems fairly repetitive, still enough perceptive essays elucidate, among other aspects, the philosophical consequences of the ambiguity of the homo-diegetic narrative voice, since most of the tale is presented as an imaginary translation from English into Spanish of a travelogue to the City of Immortals by Flaminus Rufus, a Roman military officer who volunteered to find it somewhere in Northern or North Eastern Africa. He had accidentally come upon it, as he found out after having drunk from a stream which conferred eternal life and acted as limit and passage to the City. He had eventually escaped from it in order to regain his forsaken mortality. In the 20th century, another stream had given him back his mortality, but before passing away, his manuscript was given to a princess by a Jew named Joseph Cartaphilus, probably Rufus himself under disguise. However, the narrator states at the end that his story looks implausible if the facts are attributed to a Roman officer, but that they are not so if the author of the manuscript, the Immortal who escaped from his City and recovered his mortal humanity is Homer, the one who allegedly accompanied Rufus during his puzzled exploration of the city, according to the same manuscript. This confusion between two characters presented first as entirely distinct obeys the very Borgesian contention that individual personality is an illusion, that "[n]adie es alguien" (Borges, 1986: 100) [nobody is somebody or, at least, that "un solo hombre inmortal es todos los hombres" [a single immortal man is all men] (100), because unlimited time allows him or her to do and to become what any other person has done and become. Furthermore, immortality teaches that everything has already happened or can happen again in the course of centuries, that human agency is useless, because "cada acto (y cada pensamiento) es el eco de otros que en el pasado lo antecedieron, sin principio visible, o el fiel presagio de otros que

5. Since both tales are little known in English, though translations are available, a short description of their contents might help to see their common features with Borges' "El inmortal." Lazare's is a hetero-diegetic narrative focusing on a traveler searching for gold. The historical time is not specified, but the ruins of the city where he sees people silently and purposely wandering unmistakably stem from classical antiquity. Their predicament is explained through a curse: since their wealthy and pleasurable city made them too content to feel the need for the 'Mystery,' a hermit told them that they would not feel fear anymore and, as a result, they eventually lost all curiosity and will, too; their indifference turn them into living ghosts similar to Borges' Immortals. Navarro Ledesma's tale is also an imaginary voyage by none other than Dante Alighieri to an ancient Greek ruined city, the aptly named Athanatopolis. This city without death had been abandoned by its former immortal inhabitants, because everlasting life had taken from them any meaningful interest in life.

en el futuro lo repetirán” [every act (and every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, or the faithful presage of others that will repeat it in the future] (100). This idea, while conceptually significant for interpreting the story and justifying the Immortals’ lethargy, can be overlooked if we are to consider the City of Immortals and its inhabitants as a speculative, but really existing place in the fictional world masterfully build through the narration of Rufus’ adventures. This City can then be seen through the lenses of the opposition between the civilised and the barbarian, primitive or decadent, also underpinning most archaeological imaginary voyages and lost-race tales here considered.

When Rufus unwittingly crosses the immortality stream, he sees a city with arches, fora and other features of Greco-Roman urbanism, but also niches and shallow wells from which the only inhabitants of the city emerge. They are naked men, with dirty grey skin and unkept beard. They seem unable to speak, as well as wholly indifferent to the visitor and his needs. They eat snakes. The Roman officer considers them right away members of one of the most famous among the savage races known, or fantasized by the ancients, that of the Troglodytes, a name that we already found in Schwob’s narrative, and whose denomination has been adopted for the prehistorical cave men (re)discovered by 19th century scientific Palaeontology. According to both ancient and modern image of the troglodyte as an animal-like or underdeveloped kind of human, Rufus uses terms such as “estirpe bestial” [bestial lineage] (95) or “infantiles en la barbarie” [childlike in their barbarity] (95) to describe them, and states that they “no inspiraban temor, sino repulsión” [inspired revulsion rather than fear] (96). Moreover, he asserts his superiority, for example, by praying aloud in order to “intimidar a la tribu con palabras articuladas” [to intimidate the tribe with articulate words] (96). The aloofness of his attitude toward the Troglodytes is unmistakably like that of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Professor Challenger in *The Lost World* and other European and American explorers of similar surviving lost civilisations in imperial adventure tales. However, Borges’ ironic subversion of popular fiction stereotypes soon follows. After crossing the outskirts populated by the troglodytes, Rufus accesses the City of Immortals through a sort of initiation labyrinth. The City does not materially confirm the hypothetical reconstructions of any *polis* to be seen in the illustrations of contemporary books dealing with the Archaeology of the ancient Mediterranean, and nourishing the topological imagination in popular lost-world romance. The City of Immortals is a scandal for reason, an architectural abomination where every feature seems to deny any sense and purpose. Its unconceivable intellectual horror “*contamina el pasado y el porvenir y de algún modo compromete a los astros*” (italics in the original) [its mere existence pollutes the past and the future and somehow compromises the stars] (87). Like H.P. Lovecraft’s weird cities, it seems the work of mad gods, its

design being frightening perfect in a god-like fashion. However, we find out that such contorted creation are the Immortals themselves, and that these are the bestial Troglodytes. One of them, who had followed him as he were a dog, is also who finally talks and identifies himself as Homer, the father of Western literature, and the first immortal poet in fame.

Homer had lived in the first, rationally built City of Immortals, but after the latter have decided to destroy it, he had advised them to build instead its parody, as a sort of temple for the irrational gods of which we just know that they are not like us. After this “último símbolo a que condescendieron los Inmortales” [last symbol to which the Immortals condescended] (99), they became persuaded of the vanity of any human endeavour, and they decided to live in a speculative mental world, while their bodies were neglected until they acquired their current Troglodytes’ appearance. Eventually, in the 10th century, all the Immortals quit their city to find the stream that would regain them personal and individual death. What happened to their City when the Immortals had left it, it is up to the reader to imagine, knowing that that City had probably existed as a symbol rather than a material, empirically observable reality. Its very name is an allegorical designation. Accordingly, this invites readers to look for potential underlying meanings. Borges himself had made explicit the story’s philosophical dimension regarding the essence of personality, or the lack of it, in the flow of time. Another plausible interpretation could be that, since the Immortals looked so primitive and savage that they could be mistaken for Plinian Troglodytes, arts and thought are not a preservative from bestiality. On the contrary, Homer and his companions had overcome human constraints when building their monstrously godlike City and devoted themselves to the supremely human discipline of pure Philosophy, but by doing this they had ended up in a degenerated state akin to that of the pre-intellectual hominids in popular adventure fiction. Homer, the former greatest poet of all, who had enjoyed the first, conventionally ‘civilised’ City of Immortals before becoming instrumental in its sublimely perverted reshaping, has evolved into a mute idiot, hardly able to remember his own verses, only to retrieve his former wisdom and to begin talking to Rufus after the Roman officer had broken the closeness of the City upon his entering there.

Rufus acts in a manner similar to the typical hero in popular lost-world romances who re-introduces historical evolution in the visited place by the very fact of exploring it. Moreover, he is not helpless as Schwob’s Roman explorers were. He is allowed to understand the origin and the reason for the gothic-like, weird setting of the City of Immortals; this knowledge makes it relatively tolerable when being in the company of fellow Immortals. Furthermore, Rufus’ mere presence allows Homer to recover his voice and to climb up anew the ladder of civilisation, up to the point of embracing normal human agency in order to defeat the curse of

immortality, and to re-enter the literary tradition, a fact symbolically underlined in the text through the knowledge by Homer of the translations from his poems into a barbarian language such as English, as well as of its universal derivation of his myth. Life, poetry and heroism are, therefore, indirectly reaffirmed. Therefore, Borges would seem to share here with mainstream imperial lost-race tales set in modern times a basic optimism regarding life and, namely, civilised life as it has been understood in the West from classical antiquity until modern times, with the products of the individual spirit, from poetry to conquering adventurousness, as cornerstones for a successful existence. The differences between Rufus and Professor Challenger, for instance, are also significant. Schwob's and Borges' travellers do not conquer their monsters; they only avoid them through escape (individual, or collective as it is the case with Borges' Immortals). The ominous presence of the Troglodytes remains as a symbolic reminder of civilisation's fragility. This would not be due not to universal death and inescapable entropy, as Borges could mean, but also due to an always menacing barbarism lying in humankind's present and foreseeable future, as suggested by to Moravia, as well as in its prehistorical past or present in an everlasting cycle, as a poignant archaeological lost-race tale from the 1940s suggests.

V. (Vilhelm) Beneş's "Amo, amas, amat..." (collected in *Semn rău*, 1943) is a virtually unknown story even in its author's country, Romania, although Beneş is a minor canonical writer there, especially thanks to his fantastic fiction.⁶ As a consequence, it requires an extensive description of its content for a better understanding of its significance. But what was so scandalous in this story to deserve its decades-long oblivion? One possible explanation could be that that tale was, indeed, puzzling. Its prehistorical setting was familiar both to general readers and critics in countries where ape-men and primitive men, past or present, were already a common feature in adventure fiction, but this had not acquired any status, popular or otherwise, in Romanian literature in this period yet. In fact, both prehistorical and lost-world romances such as those written by J.-H. Rosny aîné (e.g., *La Guerre du feu*, 1909) or Jules Verne (e.g., *Le Village aérien*) were virtually unknown genres in Romanian literature when Beneş published his story. His attempt at reviving, in

6. Beneş contributed to the geographical and social universalisation of Romanian fantastical literature through the introduction of exotic sceneries from the past in stories such as "Cetatea cu steaguri albe" (collected in *Semn rău*), where a 14th century king of Bohemia reigns over a court of corpses. In this and other stories by Beneş combining the historical and the fantastical modes, the symbolic function of the places described in them, as well as their ornate writing, are suggestive of a Modernity still linked to turn-of-the-twentieth-century aesthetics. On Beneş's fantastic fiction, see Ilie (2008).

the world of fiction, the hypothetical archaic mentality of our (pre)human ancestors was, therefore, a significant contribution to Romanian literary history. Moreover, “Amo, amas, amat...” was also highly unusual in the already considerable history of international adventure fiction featuring hominids, since it avoided the usual plot based on the adventures of modern (and imperial) explorers discovering primitive lost races in secluded areas, as well as the exclusive setting in the Stone Age in classic prehistorical fiction.

“Amo, amas, amat...” transports readers to an unknown distant coastal land surrounded by mountains and forests. The beach and the surrounding caves are only inhabited by a group of hardly biped hominids. Although they can manufacture rough stone tools and raw hides cover their bodies, they look extremely primitive. They are unable to speak and to use fire. They seem animals moved by pure instinct, subject to nature’s discomforts, such as changing weather conditions, and especially hunger. Their utter bestiality comes to the fore when their alpha male, named Hâhân after the guttural sounds he and his tribe make to secure some degree of pre-linguistic communication, brings them a bear he has killed. They quickly devour it raw up to the bones, while they fight for its still steaming blood. Their ferocity is compatible with fear: they appear also as fearful beings, frightened by their own image in the water, and trembling in their cave when a storm troubles the sea. As the evolved gorillas surrounding *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) in Edgar Rice Burroughs’ famous adventure romance, the global success of which did not spare Romania, Beneş’s cavemen are basically beings of instinct; they seem as unable to reflect as well as to speak. The Romanian writer confirms, however, their humanity by using only the word ‘human beings’ (‘oameni’) to designate them. They are neither primates nor ape-men. It remains unclear whether they are a surviving population having kept pre-human characteristics, or a group of *Homo sapiens* degenerated back into the pre-human for any reason, but their strangeness is far from being alien to humankind. This fact is also underlined by the way they are seen by their forced visitor, a highly educated ancient Roman man who lands on their beach following the above mentioned storm.

This arrival modifies the chronological setting of the story from the previous apparent prehistory to classical antiquity, in a period when Rome still ruled the waves, and Mediterranean traders as well as geographers knew of sea routes from Thule to the Canary Islands. Therefore, it was plausible to find one of its citizens in such a faraway location. He could be an explorer. If he were not, he is, like Robinson Crusoe, resourceful enough to have secured in his rowboat weapons and other useful objects for his survival on shore. They already come in handy when first contact takes place. The cavemen are first scared by the view of this new biped, but when they approach him, the Roman uses an arrow to injure one of them

in order to show them that he is not defenceless. Once his superiority is proven through this act of violence, he tends right away the caveman's wounds and, at the same time, he sees that they do not look really different from the peasants or mercenary soldiers who he could encounter back home. For the Roman, they are 'creatures' ('făpturi') for their savagery, but they are still 'fellow men' ('semeni'), for whom he feels compassion above all, even if they look as animals barely able to stand up on their two feet. Nevertheless, he is also aware of the danger implied by his being alone among them. He is, indeed, the stranger. The hetero-diegetic narrator usually calls him precisely that ('străinul'). The Roman knows that his survival depends on their respecting him and on their following his instructions in order to secure food, as well as a more comfortable life for all. Although he is persuaded that he must treat the cavemen as slaves, his attitude is more paternalistic than cruel. He immediately undertakes the task of turning them into individuals more akin to civilised man. He tries to teach them how to cook food, how to hunt and fish with throwing weapons, and above all how to speak. Moreover, after he finds out that they listen captivatedly his words when he recites Latin poems in order to calm down his own longing for Rome's delights, he ceases treating them as servants. Instead, he tries to elevate them to an intellectual level which could make possible a true human communication between the cavemen and himself beyond their mutual fear, and also beyond the monstrous parody of language he at best gets from those 'savages:' some howls approximately following the rhythm of the recited verses.

At last, this civilising process seems to have made some progress. Instead of fighting each other in order to get the best pieces, the 'savage' ('sălbatici') Troglodytes wait for the Roman and Hâhân to distribute their common, already cooked food. But fate is written. Just when they have succeeded at last to repeat as a choir the loving words from the story title, one of them fatally hits their teacher on the back with a stone axe. The description of their devouring the still warm body does not spare any gory detail. The cavemen fight for his parts, they eat his still palpitating insides, they break his fingers to gnaw them, while Hâhân cuts his head and devours his eyes and the very tongue that had fascinated them a few minutes earlier. This scene is all the more horrific for its matter-of-fact tone. Coming unexpectedly, the described killing is much more frightening. With it, the gothic potentiality of the contact between men and monsters reaches full fruition. Its horror is heightened by the last image in the tale: one of the savages has put the Roman's toga upon his shoulders and howls as he were still imitating his victim's recitations, while his shade in the setting sun "se întindea nemărginit, peste mare, ca și ar fi vrut să cuprindă întreaga lume" [stretched out beyond the sea as if it were to encompass the whole world] (Beneș, 1943: 206).

Given its position at the very end, this apocalyptic sight could be considered a signal inviting us to read the tale as a desperate protest against the savagery engulfing the world when it was written or, at least, published. Soviet Communism, Nazism and other local forms of totalitarianism were causing the death of millions. World War II was still raging in 1943, and no end to the violence looked near. Civilisation was proving to be a monstrous caricature of itself, a pretence hiding the underlying essential barbarism symbolised by the toga hardly concealing the Troglodyte's nude bestiality. Furthermore, the Roman's fate in Beneş's story shows how poetry, as a mark of literature and high culture in general, is dramatically ineffectual against man's savagery. Contemporary events suggested how humanists had horribly failed in appeasing the human urge to kill and to destroy. The failure of the only individualised character in "Amo, amas, amat..." in his attempt to govern and to enlighten the primitive mob is perhaps a metaphor for a similar failure by the best men in taming the Hâhâns, the Hitlers of the age, and perhaps of every age. In that moment, it was perhaps unavoidable for Beneş not to subvert the ideological foundations of imperial lost-world romance, including its archaeological variety, by negating any potential triumph to his civilising hero, who does not even receive a name in the story. Any individual agency appears to be unable to prevent a quick reversion to the old ways, as the symmetry between the eating of a bear at the beginning and that of the Roman at the end indicates. Whereas Odysseus is able to finally escape in Moravia's contemporary parable on totalitarianism, in Beneş's there is no way out of this circle, neither for the savages nor for the civilised intellectual victimised by them, as so many others had been, and still were, in those terrible times.

On the other hand, a very different meaning can be deduced from the text. The Roman castaway's acts could be seen as similar way to those by European conquerors having come into first contact with previously unknown populations, especially if deemed savage, from the very beginnings of European overseas expansion until the scramble for Africa and contemporary colonialism. He suddenly appears in the cavemen's world and, without obvious provocation, attacks them. It is true that this and other actions are dictated to him by the necessity of subduing them in order to save his own life, but Beneş's Roman never doubts the convenience of 'civilising' them, or of his right to rule them. Although his sensitive and caring personality soon changes his exercise of power into a true desire of making the 'savages' his true companions through education, as well of improving both the material and the spiritual conditions of their life, his attitude reflects both Roman and modern imperialism, including its ambiguous nature as a historical process through which the colonised are both repressed and given the material and cultural instruments necessary for their eventual liberation and participation as legally equals

in global politics. Popular lost-world romance would have endorsed this process as the white man's burden. Beneş, who came from a country which was never a colonizer, illustrates through his hero's failure the inescapable failure of imperial ideals. If Western civilisation had failed in its core, how could it prosper where it had been imposed from outside against the natural evolution, or stasis, of other civilisations even those as monstrously primitive as the community portrayed in "Amo, amas, amat..."? Therefore, this parable could also be read as a comment about the colonialists' folly of wishing to 'civilise' those who are unwilling or unable to embrace humanist values inherited from classic antiquity, which are alien to those whose history has taken them into different paths. Colonialism was not only morally questionable, but above all useless. The best of intentions could not overcome deeply engrained savagery.

Beneş's pessimism is in agreement with the rather dark conception of human nature and fate as they appear in most modern lost-world romances set in classical antiquity and featuring different sorts of Troglodytes, such as Marcel Schwob's "Les Embaumeuses" (1891; *Le Roi au masque d'or*, 1892) and Borges' "El inmortal." However, perhaps nobody went farther on this road than Beneş. "Amo, amas, amat..." is probably the clearest of all fictional reflections on the question of civilisation versus barbarism, as these terms appear respectively embodied in classic antiquity travellers and in the (un)communities of monsters they encounter. It certainly deserves more attention than it has received so far, even without considering its original and literarily successful blending of historical, speculative, adventure and horror/gore fiction. Moreover, Beneş's story strikes the right balance between an effective narrative pace and the highly detailed descriptions written in a kind of prose that succeeds in generating the right moods in the reader through a poignant use of the emotional rhetoric of turn-of-the-century Decadence, albeit updated in a more contemporary, stylised and even art-deco manner, before Borges would choose a similar way of writing, for example, in "El inmortal." Both stories suggest that lost-race tales set in ancient times should not be taken lightly as works of literary art, as if they were examples of those popular fictions so easily and undiscerningly ignored by too many mainstream literary critics and historians. Features borrowed from popular fiction can be used by all sorts of writers with all sorts of purposes in order to produce literary masterpieces such as the parables on civilisation and barbarism by Schwob, Moravia, Beneş and Borges considered here⁷.

7. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the 4th Helion International Conference "Frontiers of the Possible: Borders and Openings in Speculative Fiction", which took place in Timisoara (Romania) on May the 10th and 11th 2018. The full paper was written within the framework of the

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research project HAR2015-65957-P under the Spanish R & D & I National Plan. I thank Prof. Sara Martín for having helped me to improve its language and contents.