

Of Humans and Spiders in the Meridion(ist) Space of Imperial Difference: Resisting the Humanist Monologue

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Abstract

While during Renaissance in Northern Italy, the first humanists theorized the revival of Hellenistic thought confronting Christian saturated culture, in Southern Italy people practiced Afro-Mediterranean pagan rites thanks to the influence of ancient Greek culture (since Magna Graecia) and, later, to the influence of Islamic culture (since the VIIth century). The present essay aims at revisiting the humanist framework through a ritual cult known as tarantism: a trance-inducing ritual and related to the belief in the spider's poisoned bite and a consequent dancing cure. The father of Italian anthropology Ernesto De Martino defined it as a musical exorcism *cum* catharsis and, also, the Southern tangible way to resist 'Christianity's expansion', through the birth of new, minor local formations on the ruins of the orgiastic cults. Following Lévi Strauss, De Martino is also aware of the inner battle of the Western ethnographic journey, which on the one hand firmly 'lies within the framework of modern humanism'; on the other hand, it offers the possibility of 'coming-to-awareness of certain humanistic limits of one's own civilization.' Tarantism, then, may be a trial for Western humanistic limits and its cultural logic, whose matrix has been informed by what the decolonial thinkers call "coloniality of power" (Quijano), implemented not only in the space of colonial difference but also in the space of imperial one (Mignolo), that is to say, in Northern Mediterranean or, as the Jesuits called this part of "backward" Europe, "our Indies." The present revival of this ancient and vernacular ritual, called neo-tarantism, is reinterpreted by the French ethnologist George Lapassade less as an exorcistic cult than an adorcistic one, which would lead to the re-birth of disempowered people, who in the past used to believe in the spider's poisoned bite and now in temporarily autonomous zones of effervescent communal re-birth through dance. Perhaps, it is also a way of reimagining humanism in the third millennium, a posthumanist world where humans

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pay respect even to spiders.

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*Find a corner in your village
and make it sacred, Go and
pay it a visit before leaving
and after coming back. Stay
outside in the open air more.
Read poems aloud.
Express admiration for
someone. Go out at dawn
every now and then. Spend
your time close to an animal,
Try to feel the world with the
eyes of a fly, With the paws of
a dog.¹*

Franco Arminio

The interrelated phenomena of Humanism and Renaissance started in Italy between fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when Greek and Latin classics were rediscovered and through them a ‘rebirth’ of European culture occurred, after the so called ‘dark’ Middle Ages. Interestingly, this rebirth was detected in the nineteenth century, in particular by central European historians like Jules Michelet and Jakob Burckardt.² Thus Renaissance, which was born in Italy, tellingly, was not coded by the Italians but by the northern Europeans. In other words: the southern *past* was recognised by the *present* of the northern gaze.

The story goes that Humanism (or early Renaissance) was initiated in central-northern Italy by the Trecentists Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio, who, reinterpreting religion, put the human being centre stage. For instance, Petrarca promoted the study of classical languages like Greek, which he considered a dead language. As a matter of fact, due to the differing length of Byzantine rule in northern as opposed to southern Italy (above all in Salento, a sub-region of Apulia and at that time the periphery of the crumbling Byzantine Empire), at that time Greek was not a dead language but still largely written and spoken. As Luigi Carducci states:

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priests and monks cultivated an asset, that of the Greek language, which in Central-Northern Italy was virtually unknown and which only later the West ‘laboriously would have re-gained with the advent of mature Humanism’ ... Nor humanists, who were very fond of anything ancient and who invited Oriental intellectuals to teach them Greek, realized that they had in their own home the possibility to do that ... And it is curious that although in Terra d’Otranto the learned *casulana*³ language was inevitably coming to an end, elsewhere university chairs in Greek were being established: at the Florentine Academy and the University of Padova, etc.⁴

But it was not only the Greek language that arrived from the Orient, also ancient *unspeakable rites* landed on southern shores with mythical symbols at their core, such as the *tarantula* or *taranta* (spider) and its bite: a ritual cult known as tarantism. It is mostly considered a trance-inducing ritual and related to the belief in the spider’s poisoned bite and a consequent dancing cure, whose origin is rooted in ancient Mediterranean pagan customs.⁵ The father of Italian anthropology Ernesto De Martino, who was the first to systematically and unbiasedly study the ‘Apulian malady’, defined it as a musical exorcism *cum* catharsis, whose antecedents were

practiced all over Greece and theorized by Pythagoreanism, which in these very lands had its day: the tarantate⁶ recalled maenads, Bacchantes, Corybantes, and everyone else who took part in a religious life rife with orgiastic cults and ‘mania’ in the ancient world.⁷

Therefore, while in northern Italy confronting Christian saturated culture, the first humanists theorized the revival of Hellenistic thought, in Southern Italy people practiced afro-Mediterranean pagan rites thanks to the influence of ancient Greek culture (since Magna Graecia and even earlier) and, later, to the influence of Islamic culture (since VIIth century). Indeed, it was the southern tangible way to resist ‘Christianity’s expansion’ as De Martino puts it, through the birth of new, minor local formations on the ruins of the orgiastic cults. And while in the south these ritual cults were performed, in the North they were studied or narrated. Florentine Cristoforo Degli Onesti, for instance, who taught medicine in Padua from 1379 to 1386, in his *De venenis* dedicates to tarantism the chapter ‘De morsu tarantulae.’⁸ Later in 1531, Francesco Berni in his rewriting of

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Boiardo's *Orlando in Love*, singularly compares the variety of human follies to those of people attacked by the *tarantula*.

And such in our Apulia is the way
They heal suffering from the spider's bite;
Who strange vagaries play, like men possessed;
Tarantulated, as 'tis there express'd
For this, 'tis needful, touching sharp or flat,
To seek a sound which may the patients please;
Who, when they find the merry music pat,
Dance till they sweat away the foul disease⁹

Also Leonardo da Vinci, in his *Bestiario*, around 1494, surprisingly anticipates De Martinian hermeneutics (see ahead) when he affirms: 'The bite of the taranta maintains a man in his intention, that is, whatever he was thinking when he was bitten.'¹⁰ So, in Humanist culture tarantism was well-known; so well-known that in the late 16th century Jesuits were sent from Spain to Italy to eradicate these pagan cults in the subjugated Kingdom of Naples, which they considered *las Indias de por acá* (the Indies over here).

But where are we exactly? We are in the south-easternmost point of Italy, just opposite Albania and Greece: Otranto, its ancient historical capital, is separated from Albania by just 45 miles of sea water. It's right in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea and far from north-western Europe, where modern occidental identity was born.

Meridionism or the discursive space of internal imperial difference

In modernity, following the practice of translating a physical space (geography) into a moral one, mainly at the end of the eighteenth century, the northerners began to look for the last European boundary trying to exactly spot where the march of civilisation stopped and one passed from civilization to barbarism, from progress to backwardness; in short, from proper Europe to the first flickers of Africa. Indeed, Napoleon's official A. Creuzé de Lesser, around the start of the nineteenth century, stated: 'Europe ends in Naples, and it ends there rather badly. Calabria, Sicily, all the rest, that's Africa.'¹¹ However, this otherizing epistemological practice started centuries earlier, after America was 'discovered' and the rise of the Atlantic World followed. As the father of decolonial thinking A. Quijano claims, it is the time when historically a new geo-cultural region rose:

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Europe; ‘more specifically, Western Europe. A new geo-cultural identity emerged as the central site for the control of the world market. The hegemony of the coasts of the Mediterranean and the Iberian Peninsula was displaced toward the northwest Atlantic coast in the same historical moment.’¹²

De Martino’s ethnographic study of tarantism is quite attentive at this ‘moment’. Speaking of the Italian South, he cannot help but quote Jesuit father Michele Navarro, who travelled the harshest parts of Calabria and Sicily, and in a letter written from Messina in 1575 concluded: ‘I am sure that anyone who proves himself worthy in *these Indies of ours* will also be suited to those across the Ocean.’¹³ From his perspective of critical ethnocentrism¹⁴ and following Lévi Strauss, he is also aware of the inner battle of the Western ethnographic journey, which on the one hand firmly ‘lies within the framework of modern humanism’, whose proposal is never to be bracketed; on the other hand it offers the possibility of ‘coming-to-awareness of certain humanistic limits of one’s own civilization.’¹⁵ Such considerations should be ‘valid not only for the ethnography of the so-called primitive civilizations, but also for metropolitan ethnography, at least insofar as the latter addresses the study of archaic phenomena still present in the cultural life of modern nations.’¹⁶ To this multifaceted position we will come back later. Here, it needs to be pointed out that these two kinds of ethnographies presuppose two kinds of human encounters, which precisely originated during the rise of the Atlantic World, when Iberian missionaries headed to the West Indies (the New World) and to the Italian Indies with the same mission: ‘eradicate errors, superstitions, and abuses.’¹⁷

What De Martino *ante-litteram* recalling is, in decolonial terms, the formation of the so-called ‘coloniality of power’ or the underlying cultural matrix of all Western projects of colonialism, ‘based upon ‘racial’ social classification of the world population under Eurocentered world power.’¹⁸ What is interesting to us is that this matrix or grammar of power pervaded the entire Eurocentered world following the rise of the Atlantic. That is to say, it pervaded both the human encounter with the New World (the West Indies) and the Old one (‘Italian Indies’).

If this is so, Europe as a modern geo-cultural identity established itself some time during the seventeenth century and, importantly, to the

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detriment both of non-European peripheries (what we now call ‘global south’) and, during the nineteenth century, of European peripheries (European south / northern Mediterranean). In other words, it established itself not only against the Occident (Mignolo’s Occidentalism)¹⁹ and the Orient (Said’s Orientalism)²⁰ but also against its South (Pfister’s Meridionism), a sort of the constitutive outside even though *inside* of Europe.

Manfred Pfister has first spoken of an ‘intra-European Meridionism’ that, although it has not had the same devastating consequences that Orientalism brought upon Oriental peoples by legitimising colonialism, yet it has played ‘an incisive role in the formation of British and European cultural self-understanding.’²¹ Occidentalism, Orientalism, and Meridionism share a similar rhetoric and are just some of the discursive formations belonging to the offspring of the colonial matrix of power (CMP) that had been generated since the rise of the Atlantic and the fall of the Mediterranean. Importantly, although the logic of Western imperial epistemology commonly consists in a meta-discourse that invariably validates itself by disqualifying the difference, it must be noted that the various otherizing discursive formations operate on different terms. Walter Mignolo (2007) distinguishes between ‘colonial difference’ and ‘imperial difference.’²² The first difference occurs between colonisers and colonised. The second difference occurs *within* the modern imperial domain. Thus Madina Tlostanova writes:

To put it simply, starting from about the sixteenth century a global imperial hierarchy appeared in the emerging world system. Within this hierarchy several imperial leagues were formed and transformed in the course of time. In the post-Enlightenment modernity Spain, Italy, and Portugal moved to the position of the South of Europe and hence to the *internal imperial difference* that never collapsed into absolute or insurmountable forms. The Ottoman sultanate and Russia, on the contrary, became the zones of the *external imperial difference*, as they were rooted in different (from the core European norm) religions, languages, economic models, and ethnic-racial classifications. Both internal and external imperial others were never allowed to join the first league and become equal to Great Britain, France, or the United States today.²³

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Hence, a degree of inadequacy is attributed to the ‘imperial other’, who is somewhat behind in time (history) or marginal in space (geography). What is interesting is that the imperial other may also be intra-European (having internal imperial difference) since there were European countries which had fully succeeded in building an empire and those which in the nineteenth century no longer had one or had not succeeded yet. The latter positioned themselves in the lower ranks of the hierarchical ladder of coloniality and lagged behind in the contest for progress. As a result, the meridianist binary is: ‘advanced’ North-West Europe versus ‘backward’ South-Eastern Europe.

A meridianist evidence of backwardness is that, until recently (mid-twentieth century), some Southern Italians thought they could cure themselves through dance and music, in the same way as – so the CMP story goes – the western Indians did before the arrival of Columbus.

Tarantism: the Southern malady

Now, let us go back to Apulia’s southernmost part; the Salento subregion, we have said, separated from the Balkan coast by a narrow strip of sea, which cannot prevent you from seeing the opposite mountainous coast on clear days when the wind blows from the north. In this ‘remote’ corner of Italy, a scientific team led by Ernesto De Martino conducted a fieldwork on the relics of an old world that was about to vanish in the face of an impetuous modernization. De Martino called Salento *La terra del rimorso* (The Land of Remorse). The expression ‘land of remorse’ in Italian is a pun having a twofold meaning: ‘rimorso’ can be both ‘regret’ and ‘re-bite’ (‘morso’ means ‘bite’). Only if we interpret ‘rimorso’ as *re-biting regret*, we can understand why De Martino considered this place a land with ‘a wretched past which returns and offers itself up to reparation through human choice.’²⁴

But to start assembling this hermeneutic puzzle, it is worthwhile listening directly and at length to De Martino’s tale.

When the team reached Galatina on June 20 1959, our first concern was that of obtaining the opportunity to attend one of the home exorcisms which, as noted, became more numerous in the Salentine towns with the coming of the feast-day of June 29. But this was not all easy task ... We confided our concerns to the manager of the Cavallino Bianco, who told us that once before

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opening his sunny precarious little hotel he had ‘played’ for *tarantati* and that in Nardò he knew two brothers who were still actively employed as musicians. And so, in the late afternoon of the 24th, we left with him for Nardò in search of the two brothers, who had a barbershop in the center of the town, readapting the old tradition of the barber-phlebotomist to local therapeutic needs. The two brothers were not in the shop, but the shop-boy told us that the older one was at that very moment playing for a *tarantata* in a nearby alley. And lending an ear we could hear the echo of a rustic concertino dominated by the pressing rhythm of the tambourine ... The rhythm of the tambourine revealed the melodic line of the ‘dance of the little spider’ the tarantella: it was the ancient tarantella of the South in its original therapeutic function ... Discerning a crowd of persons outside of a hovel, we immediately located the house from which the sounds emerged. We quickened our step and were in front of the door; we made our way through the crowd, bestowing a plain smile upon the many eyes in the process of asking, ‘Who are these strangers?’ And finally, out of the blue, from day to night, we found ourselves brutally hurled onto another planet ... Here [a miserable one-room dark dwelling], within the limits marked by the white canvas, the *tarantata* performed, dressed in white like the canvas upon which she danced, her waist tied with a sash and her black hair tumultuously loosened and falling in her olive face, where one could see obstinately immobile and hard traits and eyes like a sleepwalker’s, which opened and then partially shut. In the meantime, the guitarist, the accordionist, the tambourinist and our barber-violinist performed in turn in this vibrant event of sound-therapy.²⁵

What is interesting for us here is that this woman’s performance, the supposed spider’s bite, its summer re-surgence (re-bite/ri-morso), and the subsequent dancing-beyond-exhaustion cure, bore the stigma of a thousand year-old ritual that, to De Martino, was turned into a minor religion in around fourteenth-century Apulia; and it is precisely in this period Humanism was rising in Northern Italy representing the hegemonic Christian tradition. De Martino controversially put it in this way:

We dated its birth to the period between the expansion of Islam in the Mediterranean and the counteroffensive of the West up to the era of the Crusades. This was an era in which Ancient Apulia

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underwent harsh individual and collective experiences, when the sinister fame spread of real crises of arachnidism that struck the encamped Christian armies, which most likely facilitated the formation of the *taranta* symbol.²⁶

In provocative words, we might say that if in the north Humanism was at issue, in the south Arachnidism was. It is maintained that this was due to the region's exposure to the century-old influence of Islam and Oriental culture. Indeed, if tarantism would have antecedents in ancient Mediterranean (Dionysus' ecstatic cults), it also would have parallels with some contemporary African and Oriental ecstatic religions like Haitian *voodoo*.

After the obscure period of its formation as a mythical-ritual symbol supposedly during the Middle Ages, tarantism entered Western cultural conscience in the Renaissance (or the first modernity)²⁷ and it entered as a sign of Southern Italian difference. In the early seventeenth century, the popular cult of natural magic met the high culture of Baroque iatromusic (Kircherism), which retrieved Plato's, Pythagoras's and Hippocrates' ideas about the belief in the healing power of music. Subsequently, in the second modernity, starting with Enlightenment, tarantism was basically received as an ethnic stereotype and mainly interpreted as an illness:

- a physical illness: caused by the supposed real spider's poison;
- a psychological illness: melancholy and hysteria having to do with ancient cults;
- a (female) fictional illness: 'carnevaletti delle donne' (women's little carnivals) having to do with the peculiar feminine nature.

A sort of synthesis of all the three interpretations is offered by the English catholic Henry Swinburne traveling in Apulia in the late eighteenth. The phenomenon reminded him exactly of the ancient pagan orgies repressed by the introduction of Christianity. He concluded:

Unwilling to give up so darling an amusement, *they [Apulian ladies] devised other pretences*; and possession by evil spirits may have furnished them with one. Accident may also have led them to a discovery of the *Tarantula*; and upon the strength of its poison, the Puglian dames still enjoy their old dance, though time has effaced the memory of its ancient name and institution ... If at any time these dancers are really and involuntary affected, I can suppose it to be nothing more than an *attack upon*

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their nerves (italics mine).²⁸

Earlier in the same century, the Italian physicist Francesco Serao excluded the spider's bite as the real cause and saw tarantism as a peculiar custom of the people of the Kingdom of Naples: an 'institution of the nation', as he called it. In the nineteenth century, this ethnic interpretation dominated the whole Positivist age that would eventually lead scientists to reduce tarantism either to a mental illness to be treated according to the canons of psychiatry or to a racial 'illness' to be treated according to the canons of coloniality. In the British popular magazines, for instance, the 'credulous and the ignorant among the Italians' were associated with the savages of America, who pretended to perform cures using music;²⁹ and a children's magazine decided to report stories about tarantism just 'with a view of showing my young friends what a sad thing ignorance is, and for what evils it is accountable.'³⁰

On the contrary, according to De Martino's interpretation, tarantism was neither a (physical or mental) illness ('pathological' interpretation), nor a fiction ('theatrical' interpretation), but a magical-religious ritual, i.e., a syncretistic cultural system inherited from the past and contrived by poor subaltern people to deal with the existential problems connected to their harsh condition. De Martino speaks of 'a presence lost in critical moments of being in history,'³¹ a crisis of presence interpreted according to Heidegger's philosophy of 'Dasein'. Consequently, what the tarantate/i experienced was an existential breakdown affecting the individual's sense of self in the world to the point of vanishing in it. If the existential circumstances rendered subaltern people more vulnerable to this crisis of presence, the dancing and the mourning rituals were a means of regaining the lost presence in the world: from the indifference and the contempt of the neighbours to the mutuality and the socialisation of discomfort. In short, the anthropologist maintained that tarantism had provided a liminal zone into which class and gender oppression could be faced through a cathartic moment of provisional liberation.

Apart from some rare exceptions, this moment of catharsis before De Martino had not been acknowledged and throughout these centuries tarantism had been perceived, especially by the modern northern gaze, as a negative social issue. According to De Martino, both the Church and the Enlightenment repressed it: the first, electing St Paul as the regulator-saint

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of tarantism and reducing it to a crisis without catharsis; the second, ridiculing those who practiced this savage mania and relegating tarantism to the dustbin of history's irrational archaisms or primitivisms. Western Christianity and Science have been considered two repressive movements of modern culture which hunted the 'wise' tarantula and thus chased away the ancient traces of a non-modern cosmology, which could offer an alternative way of existence: a *re-existence*.³²

De Martino seems to fight a mental battle between his (Hegelian/Marxian) historicist training and his attachment to subaltern culture, whose rituals he did not see as incoherent fragments but as living organs fully functioning within that reality (See note 31). Although influenced by historicism, in his ethnographic exploration he used the word 'backward' only in inverted commas. Unlike Pitré (the founder of Italian folklore studies), he did not romantically idolize tarantism as relics to salvage, and, at the same time, he did not reduce it to proof of the backwardness of the Southerners, as the majority of the Southernist writers had done that far. Therefore, he excluded any 'ways of intervening to modify the ethnographically observable situation,'³³ which was anyway condemned to disappear in the space of a few decades, given that Salentine society was in motion and 'already actually intervened day by day in ways which are more or less indirect, but not for this less corrosive or destructive.'³⁴ He claimed then that tarantism, at the same time, was 'both a negative of modern civilization and a marker of a limit to its power to expand and effectively mold custom, or even, the continuous irony which contrasted the efforts made by modern civilization to create its own history.'³⁵ On one hand, he is the respectful observer of subaltern culture; on the other, because of his historicist approach and faith, he fears that this cult and its demons may put in danger our humanism, which had been devastated by Nazism and Fascism a couple of decades earlier.

On the contrary, in our postmodern and postcolonial times, we know that humanism is not alien to Nazism and Fascism³⁶ just as modernity is not alien to coloniality. As Adorno and Horkheimer put it with Enlightenment, us 'modern humans' have to come to terms with modernity's wretched side, with what is not human and not modern, with what resists humanism, modernity and their obsessive dream of ceaseless betterment and advancement.

Neo-tarantism: the Southern cure

This claim is more overt in post-de Martinian ethnology, which reverses the dominant idea of tarantism: less an exorcistic cult than an adorcistic one, meaning with this term a positive relationship with the taranta. To the French ethnologist George Lapassade, tarantism constitutes not a form of exorcism aimed at the expulsion of evil, but a form of *adorcism* involving an identification and reconciliation with the afflicting supernatural being. Lapassade, therefore, broke with De Martino's appraisal of tarantism in relation to the misery of material and existential conditions in the South. As a matter of fact, the history of tarantism was widely suppressed by the local population up to the eighties because it still bore the stigma of that society. Indeed, during the seventies, the last few tarantate were asked to stop their ritual in St. Paul Chapel in Galatina because their performance was deemed offensive and harmful for tourism. Unexpectedly, in the nineties, new connections between tarantism, modified states of consciousness (adorcistic trance) and world music reanimated tarantism by freeing the language and memory repressed in the myth and giving a new social representation of it. Along the way, *pizzica pizzica* (the local dance derived from the old cult) has turned tarantism into neo-tarantism.³⁷ Once it was de-stigmatised, it was connected to the idea of *re-birth* rather than of *re-morse*. From a perspective which historians of religion would define as neo-irrationalist, Pierpaolo De Giorgi, a musician in a neo-tarantist ensemble, maintains that De Martino's mistake was to oppose (primitive) magic to (modern) rationality: a mistake that would have led to the belief that modern civilization was born exactly out of that alternative and that Southern Italy, still lingering on archaisms, is anti-modern and far from liberating itself from the weight of its past. On the contrary, following Gustav Jung's thinking, De Giorgi avows:

It is not magic thinking but rather mythical thinking that saves presence. Mythical thinking is an appropriate practice of individual or collective will, an act endowed with wisdom, a fertile psychic asset, a fruitful symbolic construction of reality, a conscious prefiguration of life as a battle but also as a victory of the positive. It is this victory, also in tarantism, that resolves the crisis of presence, giving back the correct dialogue between the internal and the external, the individual and the world, the self and the non-self or, still better, between the self and the other.

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Therefore, (neo)-tarantism is not an obstacle but a chance of liberation by dancing with the music that cured the tarantati/e in the piazzas all over Italy and, in truth, the world. The Land of Remorse, where the evil past used to come back and haunt its subaltern people, since it was a past which was not chosen, has become the Land of Rebirth, where it does not bite the power of the negative but the power of the positive. Hence, the suggestion that neo-tarantism beats a meridian rhythm, the rhythm of ‘Southern or Meridian thought’, whose theorist Franco Cassano, at the time of tarantism revival, proposed:

not to think of the South in the light of modernity, but rather to think of modernity in the light of the South. Thinking the South thus means that the South is the subject of thought: It does not have to be studied, analyzed, and judged by an external thought, but it must gain back the strength to think of itself on its own terms, to recapture decisively its own autonomy.

Southern thought basically means this: Give back to the South its ancient dignity as the subject of thought; interrupt the long sequence whereby it has been thought by others. This does not mean showing leniency toward localism, the muddying playing with one’s own vices that has correctly led some to call the South an ‘Inferno’. On the contrary, Southern thought must conceive the South with rigor and toughness; it has the duty to see and fight, *iuxta proprio principia*, the devastating auctioning that Southerners themselves have made of their own lands.³⁹

It was a call for the South to look at itself through its own eyes and to dance with its own music, a music that restores the presence or autonomy of the Southern subject through a rhythm which, for De Giorgi, is a lesson for modernity:

Human beings get to know themselves and recover from the loss of themselves only by recognising what presence is, that is to say, a *copresence* which gives at the same time significance and value both to the individual subject and the community as a whole (italics mine).⁴⁰

A true humanism made to the measure of humans and spiders

It is a call then to decide what true humanism is after about a millennium of Western selective humanism. May be, a culture putting spiders centre-stage

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is paradoxically more human and humane than one putting at the centre humans and their modern (will to) power. Maybe, the so-called primitive or archaic peoples, because of their direct and close contact with nature, may unfold greater gnoseological faculties and be aware of the relational aspects among the diverse elements of reality. Perhaps, being human(ist) today means fighting coloniality through non-human symbols, through what modernity has excluded as primitive because it is still in connection with nature, according to its dualistic belief in culture *versus* nature. It is exactly as Césaire's Caliban (the primitive deformed native) was, in the rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, before his insurrection against Prospero (the civilized European master):

Away, snakes, scorpions, porcupines! All stinging, biting, sticking. Beasts! Sting, fever, venom, away! Or if you really want to lick me, do it with a gentle tongue, like the toad whose pure drool soothes me with sweet dreams of the future. For it is for you, for all of us, that I go forth today to face the common enemy ... Prospero is anti-Nature. And I say: down with anti-Nature!⁴¹

As Césaire famously put it, paradoxically, European bourgeoisie after inventing humanism, disqualified the mighty voices of the other humans, reducing humanity to a monologue.

Going back to tarantism, it is as if it tried to oppose the reduction of dialogue to monologue. And to a certain extent, we may say it has been successful, if half a century after De Martino's field work, we can speak of neo-tarantism: a cultural movement which encompasses both a revival of *pizzica pizzica* and the creation of new musical styles which blend genres such as reggae, hip-hop and ragamuffin. I do not know if neo-tarantism and its sort of rave neo-tribal parties, which 'functioned as temporarily autonomous zones where effervescent communal rites took place,'⁴² are the modern version of ancient adorcistic rituals. What I know is that it definitely helps play the identity game for the re-birth of a disempowered people's self-image (even though some call it an identitarian drunkenness). Perhaps, this is also a way of reimagining a true humanism in the third millennium, as Césaire wrote: 'humanism made to the measure of the world'⁴³ - a posthumanist world where humans *pay respect* even to spiders.

Endnotes :

- ¹ *Prendi un angolo del tuo paese/ e fallo sacro, / Vai a fargli visita prima di partire/ e quando torni. / Stai molto di più all'aria aperta. / Ascolta gli anziani, lascia che parlino della loro vita. / Leggi poesie ad alta voce. / Esprimi ammirazione per qualcuno. / Esci all'alba ogni tanto. / Passa un po' di tempo vicino ad un animale, / Prova a sentire il mondo con gli occhi di una mosca, / con le zampe di un cane (Franco Arminio, *Cedi la strada agli alberi* (Milan: Chiarelettere, 2017), p. 22, my translation.*
- ² 'Renaissance' is a French word coined by Jules Michelet, but it was the Swiss scholar Jakob Burckhardt in his *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) who emphasized Renaissance as a radical break with the Middle Ages with Italy as the center of humanistic culture. According to Wallace K. Ferguson, a possible chronology is 1300-1600: 1300-1400 with Italy as centre; 1500-1600 with Spain as hegemonic country. See Paul Oskar Kristeller, Philip Paul Wiener, eds, *Renaissance Essays*, vol. I, (New York: Rochester UP, 1968), p. 64.
- ³ The word 'casulana' refers to the famous monastery of St. Nicholas of Kasoulon, which was an industrious cultural site, founded in 1098-99 at Casole, about a few miles south of *Otranto* (Lecce), in the south-eastern tip of Italy. Founded by both officials and the secular clergy, such schools were impressive witness to the richness and the vitality of Greek culture in thirteenth-century Salento and secured its survival for centuries, representing a kind of 'ethnic resistance' against the Latinization of Salento. See Wolfram H. Randner, Andreas Rhoby, Nikos Zagklas, eds., *A Companion to Byzantine Poetry* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), p. 372.
- ⁴ 'preti e monaci coltivavano un bene, quello della lingua greca, che nel resto d'Italia centro-settentrionale era pressoché sconosciuto, e che poi solo 'faticosamente l'occidente si avrebbe riconquistato con il maturo umanesimo' ... Né gli umanisti, che pure perdevano la testa per tutto ciò che era antico e che invitavano gli intellettuali dell'Oriente per imparare il greco, si resero conto di avere in casa la possibilità di farlo ... E rimane curioso il fatto che se nella Terra d'Otranto la lingua dotta casulana volgeva irreversibilmente al tramonto, altrove si andavano istituendo delle cattedre universitarie di greco: nello Studio di Firenze, nell'Università di Padova, ecc.': Luigi Carducci, *Storia del Salento. La Terra d'Otranto dalle origini ai primi del Cinquecento. Società, religione, economia*, vol. I (Galatina: Congedo Editore 2007), p. 351, my translation.
- ⁵ See Gianfranco Salvatore, 'Oltre De Martino. Per una rifondazione degli studi sul tarantismo', in L. Gino Dimitri, ed., *Quarant'anni dopo De Martino* (Nardò: Besa, 1999).
- ⁶ Sufferers from the bites of the 'venomous creatures' are referred to as *tarantate*

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or *tarantolate* (feminine plural) since those bitten were predominately female, but males (*tarantati*) were not spared by the poisonous bite.

- ⁷ Ernesto De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism* (London: Free Association, 2005), p. 11.
- ⁸ The first recorded manuscript on the topic was Guglielmo De Marra's *Sertumpapale de venenis* (1362).
- ⁹ Come in Puglia si fa contro al veleno / Di quelle bestie, che mordon coloro, / Che fanno poi pazzie da spiritati, / E chiamansi in volgar Tarantolati. / E bisogna trovar un, che suonando / Un pezzo, trovi un suon, che al morso piaccia; / Sul qual ballando, e nel ballar sudando / Colui da sé la vera peste caccia (*Orlando innamorato*, II XVII 6-7).
- ¹⁰ Leonardo da Vinci, cod. H 18 v.
- ¹¹ 'L'Europe finit à Naples et même elle y finitassez mal. La Calabre, la Sicile, tout le reste est de l'Afrique.' Creuzé de Lesser, *Voyage en Italie et en Sicile fait en 1801 et 1806* (Paris: Didot l'aîné, 1806), p. 96.
- ¹² Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', *Nepantla* 1.3 (2000), p. 537.
- ¹³ De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, p. 4, italics mine.
- ¹⁴ George R. Saunders, "'Critical Ethnocentrism'" and the Ethnology of Ernesto De Martino', *American Anthropologist*, 95.4 (1993): 875-893.
- ¹⁵ De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, p. 3.
- ¹⁶ De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, p. 4.
- ¹⁷ De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, p. 4.
- ¹⁸ Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality', *Cultural Studies* 21.2 (2007), p. 171.
- ¹⁹ Cfr. W. Mignolo: 'Western civilization is supposed to be something 'grounded' in Greek history as is also Western metaphysics. This reading, implicit in the Renaissance, became explicit in the Enlightenment. Occidentalism is basically the master metaphor of colonial discourse since the sixteenth century and specifically in relation to the inclusion of the Americas as part and margin of the West.' See *Local Histories/Global Designs, Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton NJ: Princeton U.P., 2012), p. 327.
- ²⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).
- ²¹ Manfred Pfister, *The Fatal Gift of Beauty: Italies of British Travellers*

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- (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), p. 3.
- ²² See Walter D. Mignolo, 'Delinking', *Cultural Studies* 21.2 (2007): 449-514.
- ²³ Madina Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet?: Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire* (Durham /London: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 2, italics mine.
- ²⁴ De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, p. 248.
- ²⁵ De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, pp. 38-39.
- ²⁶ De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, p. 247.
- ²⁷ Enrique Dussel identifies a two-stage conception of modernity in terms of the foundational role of the Southern Atlantic countries of Spain and Portugal (the first modernity initiated with the Conquest) and its continuation in the Northern Atlantic countries of England and France with the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution (the second modernity): 'World-System and "Trans"-Modernity', *Neplanta: Views from South* 3.2 (2002).
- ²⁸ Henry Swinburne, *Travels in the Two Sicilies* (London: T. Cadell and P. Elmsly, 1790), p. 307.
- ²⁹ 'Bell's Court and fashionable magazine', 1817.
- ³⁰ *The Tarantula*, 'Peter Parley's Annual', unknown year.
- ³¹ De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, pp. 2-3.
- ³² 'Re-existence' is here understood as 'the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity': Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham/London: Duke U.P., 2018), p. 3.
- ³³ De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, p. 15.
- ³⁴ De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, p. 15.
- ³⁵ De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, p. 6.
- ³⁶ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, translated by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).
- ³⁷ See George Lapassade 'Gnawa, Tarantismo e Neotarantismo', in Anna Nacci ed., *Tarantismo e Neotarantismo* (Nardò: Besa, 2001), 31.
- ³⁸ 'Non è il pensiero magico, bensì il pensiero mitico, ciò che salva la presenza. E', il pensiero mitico, un esercizio congruo della volontà singola o dell'intenzionalità collettiva, un agire dotato di senso, una fertile risorsa psichica, una fruttuosa costruzione simbolica del mondo, un'avvertita

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prefigurazione della vita in se stessa come lotta ma anche come vittoria del positivo. È ciò che, anche nel tarantismo, risolve la crisi della presenza restituendo il corretto dialogo tra l'interno ed esterno, tra l'individuo e mondo, tra l'io e il non io o, meglio, tra il sé e l'altro da sé'. Pierpaolo De Giorgi, *Il mito del tarantismo: dalla terra del rimorso alla terra della rinascita* (Galatina: Congedo 2008), my translation, p. 154.

³⁹ Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, N. Bouchard and V. Ferne, eds. (New York: Fordham U.P., 2012), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁰ 'L'uomo conosce se stesso e si guarisce dallo smarrimento solo riconoscendo ciò che davvero la presenza è, ossia una compresenza che attribuisce in pari tempo significato e valore sia all'individuo che all'altro da sé, alla collettività' in Pierpaolo De Giorgi, *Il mito del tarantismo: dalla terra del rimorso alla terra della rinascita*, p. 167, my translation.

⁴¹ Aimé Césaire, *A Tempest: Adaptation for a Black Theatre*, Trans. Richard Miller (New York: Ubu Repertory Theater Publications, 1985), p. 52.

⁴² Claudia Attimonelli, 'La notte della taranta: un rave-ival folklorico', in Alan Marzo, Olivier Dupont, Carl Åhnebrink, eds., *Odissea di un rituale italiano – Odyssey of an Italian ritual*, (Flee 002, 2019), p. 145.

⁴³ Aimé Césaire, *Discours on Colonialism*, translated by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), p. 74.