Svetlana Slapšak

Ancient Strategies of Complexity

The easy way to search for concepts of complexity in the Ancient worlds would be to chose the texts of utopias, literary and philosophical. An invented world, subject of a clear ideological projection, is more likely to translate complexity, whether it should appear as fragmentation, hierarchical structure, ladder of values, or network of related concepts. Utopia's ›condensation‹ of worldly features betrays the awkwardness of the construct, thus revealing the strategies of dealing with complexity in a negative way. The fact that we apply the term utopia, which is a European modern age invention (Thomas More) and a clever play with the impossible in the Greek grammar, to the Ancient texts, underlines the negative aspect of an artificial and voluntary arrangement, in which complexity does not rely on any defining and challenging element of meaning. But at least, this artificial and voluntary kind of complexity helps to realize that the complexity can also be misunderstood as arbitrary and ›natural‹, belonging to the concept of the world which is objectivized by definition. Last aberration in this direction would be to search for complexity after the assumed universalization of the world, done by Greek philosophers. After conceiving different theories of the universal, they – or just him, Aristoteles – went on by putting knowledge into categories, into many ›boxes‹ with precise names, numbers and titles. By opening these boxes we can reconstruct how the complexities were dealt with.

One way to avoid this is to search in texts and authors which certainly do not have the same European intellectual weight hanging around their necks, and to the epoch Europeans have had the inclination to understand as ›more complex‹ than the Golden Age of Athens, time of democracy, or Classical period – the Hellenistic and the Late Antiquity culture. More complex, certainly, in the topographic sense, mixing of cultures, expansion of languages, especially Greek, and mobility. But this is far from the list of possible complexe features, and the debate

on competing complexities between Hellenistic/Late Ancient and Classical times/cultures is yet to be opened. The initial doubt could creep in from the obvious adaptability of monarchy in modern times, and the almost total un-adaptability of the indirect democracy till today …

Athenaeus (probably the end of the II and the beginning of the III ct. A. D.) is an excellent paradigm in Hellenistic intellectual approach. He wrote a huge work, a conversation of different intellectuals and specialists at the feast given by a Roman official, *Deipnosophistae*, which is usually translated as *Philosophers at the Feast*, if it is translated at all. About half of the whole work is preserved. Athenaeus is interested in everything and anything: his guests at the imaginary (or real?) symposion debate on history, literature, mythology, techniques, hard sciences, geography, travel, food, love, philosophy, art, architecture, plants, animals, condiments, but avoid any allusion to the local, political, actual, or anything concerning power games. Their view of the world is stretched between a cosmopolitan self-assertation and the provincial necessities, which we ›inscribe‹ according to our knowledge of everyday life of the epoch and possible place of the imaginary feast (Egypt?). They act as if they were well known authorities in their world, but our knowledge of Antiquity, fragmented as it is, does not list them as great names. But they have nothing of the qualities which Marcel Detienne linked to the ›masters of thruth‹ of Archaic times, and their three basic figures – singer of tales, king, prophet. Deprived of universal authority, Athenaeus' heroes-intellectuals cling to their main power-source: memory. The art of memory is displayed in all of its mnemotechnical details: quotations, verses, numbers, names, complex structures of building up the argument based on accumulating knowledge. Brilliant artists of mnemotechnique parade in Athenaeus' work: one can imagine how much previous time was spent in li-

braries or in public baths and gardens memorizing, working up one's memory's capacities, expanding databases in one's mind: a remarkable effort that we cannot pair in no way today. Maybe it is the desire of such a command of one's mind that oriented contemporary researches to turn to Athenaeus and study him without a highbrow disdain with which he was treated by older specialists of Antiquity. The past is these Ancient intellectual heroes' pasture, but this pasture looks more like a jungle of quotations and often trivial knowledge. It is hard to imagine a better case for studying strategies of complexity. And to pinpoint – in my view – the best of many cases in which strategies of complexity is being displayed, I have chosen the Book XIII, in which Athenaeus intellectuals discuss women and love, and which bears the title *On women*, although it is slightly suspicious. The play of memory on the concepts of women can namely include the modern and contemporary study of women in Antiquity (Ancient women's studies), and therefore some relevant and convincing speculations on what was thought on women in Classical times and later. Obvious changes in women's positions, above all legal and political, have occurred between the Athenian democracy and Hellenistic time and Late Antiquity, most of them in the sense of emancipation and more rights and visibility.

There is no need to fall into the trap of concluding that the only recorded functional and highly structured direct democracy was bad for women, while monarchy was better, but the system of heirs and familiar lineage related to power was quite helpful in developing some new rights

example, searched to confirm and define his predominantly externally oriented identity by ›mirroring‹ himself/his *self* in others – women, slaves, barbarians, nature, mythical (often virtual or hybrid) creatures, divinities, animals. In this group of wild and untamed, women were extremely dangerous, at least when basic identitarian texts of democracy are analyzed, above all tragedies and comedies. One of possible philosophical classifications, or strategies of complexity, was Aristoteles', who defined women in quite demeaning terms, as if the debate on women's rights was not already at the table of the generation of Athenian intellectuals like Plato, Aristophanes, and Euripides. Athenaeus' ›masters of memory‹ had a challenging prospect, to trace a winding road of defining women in the past by the greatest authorities, and to do their own job on the topic concerned peripheral by previous (greatest) authorities. This could be a very good reason to venture into the contextual framework of Athenaeus' symposiasts.

Feasting intellectuals do not have a single woman-guest among them. They also do not have women-entertainers, as it was customary for men-only symposia – at least in earlier times. Some of the philosophers' schools, present in Athenaeus' group, are Epicureans, thus familiar not only with women's presence, but also their participation in philosophic and academic activities. The absence of women might be explained with a new and different mentality, or maybe a new social status, which did not allow for hiring expensive sexy entertainers (their role was always multiple), but whatever the reason, Athenaeus' group looks like an old boys' club. When they refer to

We should certainly invest more of attention in the neglected part of the past f. e. connecting gender and culture.

for women. Athenaeus' intellectuals may be nostalgic about the old times, but they do not (at least not all of them) pose as traditionalists. However, their debating on women and love reflects some of the changes in conceptualizing women, and thus translate some of the strategies of complexity, basically the strategies of dealing with alterity becoming a complexity. Women as *alterity* in Antiquity (especially the period of the development of *polis* in Greece) are nowadays the prevailing and generally accepted result of research, especially in historic anthropology. An Athenian citizen, to take the best known

tacky, or overtly obscene narratives, they seem to enjoy *acoustically*, which is one of the most expanded modalities of sexual satisfaction today (sexy phone industry), being cheaper, more comfortable, and less risky way of enjoying. The contextual scenery of the Book XIII can be understood fully only when we compare it to the complex setting of the Ancient symposion seen by nowaday's historic anthropologists – readers of images, and also to the changed context of Hellenistic symposion: it is definitely miserable when it comes to gentlemen's delights. The acoustic aspect of enjoyment, boldly compared and ar-

guable through today's technologically advanced but anthropologically parallel practice, appears as the main semiotic code of the Book XIII.

Let us go back now from context to concepts: discussing women and love diverges into the two main lines of explanation. One is to neutralize women's impact on culture and the world as the whole – or the memory as the whole – by expanding the complexity of gender on love and friendship, that is on the linking, primarily non-destructive emotions, although they, once expressed, may produce auto-destruction and destruction *tout court*. It is quite a development from the early Greek concepts of love as disease. The complexity of love and friendship (including animals loving people, homosexual relations, and other forms of emotional relations) emerges as a new, not yet classified complexity, which does not allow for any gender-specificity, but stresses the complexity of emotional states and modes.

The other line of explanation is slightly contradictory to the first one. It tries to re-establish gender specificity, by constructing a special mode of verbal expression for a special kind of women. Again, the work of memory is masterly displayed, by quoting, using and re-narrating the plots of the so-called Middle Comedy, collections of anecdotes, bits and pieces of many authors, historians and polyhistors, and the textual tradition which is defined as *pornography*, or writing on whores. Athenaus is the inventor or the first user of the term we know of, and whores, or hetairai, are the class of women which serve as a screen for projecting this gender specificity, or strategy of complexity. Hetairai are given a literary genre and a discourse. The literary genre is pornography, which is obviously understood as a form of prose, apart from comedy, and the discourse, or the oral genre, is the joke (witz). The hidden complexity of gender relations is thus deconstructed and re-classified, with an innovative solution to the problem of self-expression and intellectual emancipation of hetairai. In fact, all the jokes cited by Athenaeus' participants (the old boys' club) are about the intellectual superiority of hetairai, especially when their charms do not count any more, in their old age. They typically outsmart men, be it philosophers, butchers, soldiers, or kings […]. The hetairai' jokes form the bulk of the Book XIII.

By treating gender concepts in this way, Athenaeus proposes not only a new strategy of dealing with complexity, which we could define as the disciplinary expanding, interdisciplinary cooperation, and looking for a definition between genre and discourse, but he does a much more remarkable job of connecting gender and culture. The debate about women and love moves from the anthropological situation of *alterity* of women towards the integration of women into the world – even if it is the virtual world of memory – allowing for women to excell in the same privileged art of commanding the memory, and having a genre/discourse to do it properly. The gender is conceptualized – and realized in culture, and this is accepted as a general framework – a theoretical pre-condition for all the gender studies area today.

Athenaus' old boys' club did reflect on women as secondary, from the position of power and a restrained acoustic command of sexuality. But from this position new options for dealing with complexity appeared, and the ancient *alterity* has been replaced by a much more responsible and intellectually challenging process of inventing new (textual/discursive) spaces for women's identity. Athenaeus' strategy of complexity can be read as a good example of epistemological experiment, an impressive endeavor coming from the neglected part of the past in which we should certainly invest more of attention.

Literatur
D. Braund and J. Wilkins (ed.): Athenaeus and his World. Reading Greek Culture in the Roman Empire. Exeter 2000
M. Detienne: The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece. Cambridge MA 1999
F. Lissarrague: Greek Vases: The Athenians and Their Images. New York 2001
F. Zeitlin: Playing the Other. Chicago 1996
See notes by the translator, Charles Burton Gulick, for the Loeb Classical Library edition of Athenaeus Deipnosophistae, 1937