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MADNESS AND MODERNITY: THE DRAWINGS OF ANTONIN ARTAUD FROM 1944 TO 1946

*Il est trop tôt pour parler, pour écrire, pour penser peut-être,
et pendant quelque temps notre langage ressemblera au bégaiement du grand blessé
qu'on rééduque.*

Profitons de ce silence comme d'un apprentissage mystique.
M. Yourcenar, 1943

1. Taking leave of modernism

The words of Marguerite Yourcenar above (Yourcenar 1991, 529) offer a route into my subject, which is to say: Antonin Artaud, words, drawings, and the extreme and traumatic condition of an individual who pushed back the boundaries of history, of his own time, in Europe's darkest days. Such is my scope in the pages that follow.

The drawings examined in this essay were produced by Artaud between 1944 and 1946 (Derrida, Thévenin 1986; Rowell 1996). From 1938 onwards, the question of pain permeated Artaud's art, writing, and indeed his physical experience and thought. It would emerge in his drawings as a greater, and more intense presence however when, after six years of psychiatric confinement in Rodez, he found – in his “written drawings”, as he called them (Artaud 1945, 20) – the possibility of exploring that which he was no longer able to say with words. What, though, is the nature of the mental illness or madness that looks out at us from these drawings? Is it possible – as his friend and student of his work Paule Thévenin has done (Thévenin 1993, 160-161) – to relate Artaud's madness to the insanity that led to the destruction of thousands of lives, near enough, in those years? Which is to say, to trace a relationship between the madness of an individual and the existential

and identity crises presented by history? What relationship is there between such realities, one concerning the individual, the other the history of an age, of a continent, of the world? What historical and cultural factors are at work within them?

In *La poésie comme expérience* (Lacoue-Labarthe 1997, 30-31), Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, stresses that the experience of the poet is more “Erfahrung” than “Erlebnis”. Where the latter expression denotes a more common understanding of experience, the former implies something beyond it, placing the poet in the condition of one who is in dialogue with the forces that make consciousness a difficult, painful, traumatic state. Like Paul Celan and Hölderlin, Artaud challenged the sense of impotency, of the inadequacy of language as a means of probing the limits, seeking out, beyond the spoken (or heard) word, sounds and images capable of amplifying not so much the meaning of that language, but its deepest, invisible expressive potential.

Certain of Artaud’s “written drawings” therefore offer a particularly helpful starting point for a series of reflections on, on the one hand, a concept of identity that had emerged and re-emerged with a new critical awareness following the close of the Second World War, and on the other, how – leaving behind a modernism in which the cracks were clearly showing – it is from madness and suffering that the contemporary notion of the individual is reborn.

Various authors have explored idea that the Second World War marked the modern age’s most acute state of crisis (Lyotard 1979; Belting 1983). However, the particular phase of Artaud’s work that interests us here reveals a further aspect of this condition. The fragment – as a sort of stammer or rather, the impossibility of expression through a word (in the sense of an expressive whole) within a discourse that itself aspires to wholeness – becomes the only way to give voice to a consciousness shattered by experience. Narrative discontinuity, the fragmentation of identity, stammering, the silence of words: these are the signs of an age and its crisis, a crisis that cuts across language, across subjectivity, across History. Like Artaud, and like Walter Benjamin and Yourcenar – who sought the required deformation of language in the “stammer” and “silence” – the Italian painter Carol Rama perceived, in the 1940s, this condition in the individual who, uncertain and aware of an irreversible loss of points of reference, is

therefore prepared to go looking within the missing part, within the realm of feeling.

The points of contact by which these different aspects interact are to be found in the specific features of Artaud's text, in the intertextuality that links word with image, voice with sign, literature with drawing, intimacy with distance, within with without, body with sight, or indeed with an inner-sight, which seems a better term to evoke Artaud's treatment of the page less as a space for writing as for probing unrepresentable landscapes of word and sign.

Pain and the new expressive possibilities attributed to the image became the marks of an age that had arrived at one of the most tragic and challenging episodes in the history of the Western world. It is through pain that purpose, the will to continue, would be reignited; in his drawings, Artaud would dig into the page, or scuff it, leaving it "lived-in" but resilient, marked, never neutral.

Les figures sur la page inerte ne disaient rien sous ma main. Ells s'offraient à moi comme des meules qui n'inspireraient pas le dessin, et qui je pouvais sonder, tailler, limer, coudre, découdre, écharper, déchiqueter et couturer sans que jamais par père ou par mère le subjectile se plaignît (Artaud 2004, 1467a).

The term "subjectile" (Derrida 1986) is introduced to define a borderland between the subject and that which the subject can still become.

Rather than associate Artaud's madness with what he thought or wrote – and in that sense treating his mental illness and the extremes of his artistic and literary texts as inseparable, and even as causally linked – we might consider his madness as a profound signifier of an epoch, and of a stubborn and radical stance towards the ways the body, language and identity had hitherto been understood.

While Artaud has come to be seen as the epitome of the doomed genius, an atypical, extreme expression – at the edge of madness – of a challenging and, in certain senses, still unexplained period of the mid-twentieth century, immediately following the war, it is time we repositioned ideas of this sort, of isolated differentness, of individual genius, of radical transgression and revolution as the product of a quite specific, and well-trodden approach to the historiographical analysis of marginalised people and contexts. Artaud has on many occasions been described as the embodiment of the exceptional, sick individual,

and his schizophrenia set at the root of both a life and a way of writing that reside at the limits of normality and of the rules (of language and knowledge, of how to live, how to think). It is true that, as early as the end of 1918, not long after his twenty-second birthday, Artaud transferred to the Le Chanet psychiatric sanatorium at the edge of Neuchâtel in Switzerland, where the medical director was studying cases of “genius”, or psychic disturbance, in relation to certain mental functions in artists. He would remain there for around a year.

All the same, it is possible to connect individual illness and *malaise* of this sort, beyond any personalised mythology of the individual, the genius, the isolated, exceptional artist, to an – albeit, in some ways, extreme or radical – appreciation of certain irremediable phenomena that characterised those same years: the crisis of the subject that could no longer find itself, the critical awareness of the exhaustion of certain cultural models and the need to move beyond them, the impossibility of refinding and rebuilding oneself, such as Artaud asserted when, after years of psychiatric confinement, he confided that he was unable to “remake his body”.

2. Towards a cultural revolution

Freed from this prism – which for so long has also provided the paradigm by which to interpret his work – Artaud can therefore be revisited in a new light. For instance, we can begin to consider his text *Van Gogh le suicidé de la société* at the same level as his drawings (Artaud 1947b). Written after he attended an exhibition of Van Gogh’s art at the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris in January 1947, Artaud’s essay overturned the status of the individual as “victim” of society, turning instead to analyse the norms themselves by which society is regulated and individuals made victims. In doing so, it provided a crucial point of departure for future generations to follow, generations that would continue to probe the values and norms underlying the culture, systems of power, and cultural definitions and stereotypes of what constitutes mental health or madness. In Artaud’s imagery and writing, thinkers from Michel Foucault and Susan Sontag to Julia Kristeva and other contributors to periodical «Tel Quel», and artists such as Nancy Spero – with, first, her *Artaud Paintings*, and then with the *Codex Artaud* (1969-72) – found the springboard for a no-holds-barred

exploration, variously, of the body and its taboos, the silence and cultural marginalities of history, gesture and action.

In 1972, the same group behind “Tel Quel” would organise one of the first conferences on Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille, both of whom at that point were still considered minor figures, even in France. The title, *Artaud-Bataille, vers une révolution culturelle* gave a clear idea of the group’s ideological and political horizons (Sollers 1973). This rediscovery of Artaud between the years of 1965 – when «Tel Quel» published a special issue dedicated to Artaud featuring Jacques Derrida’s essay *La parole soufflée* (Derrida 1965) – and 1972 (the year of the conference at Cerisy) can therefore be placed in a context inhabited by (mostly French) intellectuals, who sought to shine a spotlight on the relationship between literature, existential experience and society at the end of a World War that had isolated, marginalised and, at times, silenced a range of important cultural energies (Subrizi, 2000).

Pourquoi? Pour faire bouger des contradictions. Supposons que certains acceptant ou feignent d’accepter Artaud et non Bataille, et réciproquement; supposons encore que, chaque fois, ce choix exclusif désigne un non vu spécifique, non vu qui, nécessairement, indiquerait comment Artaud ou Bataille sont ramenés par la conscience à un statut excentrique au lieu de mettre en cause cette conscience en son centre. Imaginons que Bataille, Artaud aient subi, subissent encore, de la part du discours métaphisique ou universitaire, une violence semblable, bref que le tentative, elle-même inévitable, de décharger leur passage, soit monnaie courante. Comment la conscience de cette monnaie pourrait-elle supporter qu’Artaud, que Bataille soient ce qu’ils sont? Il faut ou qu’ils aient été; ou qu’ils restent inaccessibles (Sollers 1973).

Introducing her 1973 collection of Artaud’s writings, meanwhile, Susan Sontag writes in terms of a modernism that has reached an advanced phase of “longevity”, and of the failure to resolve the “drastic social and psychological anxiety” that is rooted in it (Sontag 1973, 11); this is an anxiety born in some part of dissatisfaction, of doubt, of the refusal to continue to recognise as truly foundational or necessary those criteria and concepts on which the perception and production of a work or art or literature are based. In such terms Sontag identified the – by now unpreventable – condition of malaise that had afflicted both the author (She begins, “The movement to disestablish the

‘author’ has been at work for over a hundred years.”) and the reader from the start of the twentieth century but with particular intensity in the 1940s, a condition that would be variously transgressed, provoked and attacked by both Artaud and, to judge from certain works produced or published between 1940 and 1948 (the year of Artaud’s death at the age of fifty-two), a range of other figures, including Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Marguerite Yourcenar, and – in the visual arts – Alberto Giacometti, Francis Bacon and Carol Rama.

For Giacometti, the years 1946 and 1947 marked a return to drawing and painting, with portraits (*Georges Bataille*, 1947; *Portrait of a Man*, 1948; *Tristan Tzara*, 1949) and a number of sketches in which he sought, in the repeated, obsessive marks used to define his figures, a way of dematerialising their forms, in a similar manner to his sculptural work of the same years.

Between 1940 and 1945, in works such as *Appassionata* (1940), *Eretica* and *Proibito* (1944), *Dorina* (1946) and *Le Parche* (1944), Carol Rama introduced a transgressive, physical vision of the body that hovered at the limits of any sense of psychic or mental equilibrium. In many ways, the identification with objects and animals, the use of sexuality as a language with which to challenge rules and taboos, the confined, claustrophobic spaces – or in other cases, spaces extending beyond any attempt at representation – recall Artaud’s figures, fragmentation and scattered sense of space.

The themes of solitude and separation from the self also emerge in Camus’ *La peste*, of 1947, which followed the 1945 publication of his essay *Remarque sur la révolte*, in the volume *L’existence* (Camus 1945). With *L’Homme révolté*, of 1951, Camus would declare his remoteness from many of the intellectual and political positions of contemporary France: for him, the only possible revolution was an interior one, a solitary process that could be likened to the condition of the alien or exile. As with Artaud – though in a different manner – pain arises from feeling that one is beyond the self, uprooted from place and memory, in a condition in which evil has become the fundamental concern; like Hannah Arendt (albeit later) and Artaud, Camus was one of a number of European intellectuals who came to identify, in the nature of evil, the nexus of the sensibility and culture of Europe in the first years and decades immediately following the war. Tony Judt, historian of post-war

Europe, would stress these same aspects in his introduction to the 2001 edition of *The Plague* (Judt 2001).

Emmanuel Lévinas became a prisoner of war in 1940, and was held at a camp near to Hannover until 1944. In *Time and the Other* (a collection of lectures delivered in 1946 and 1947, as such immediately following the war), he addresses the question of time, linking his analysis to an examination of human knowledge as it relates to the invisible, or rather to the space that remains permanently foreclosed (to knowledge): an “invisibility”, writes Lévinas, that “results not from some incapacity of human knowledge, but from the inaptitude of knowledge as such – from its inadequation” (Lévinas 1987, 10). Lévinas understands and has experienced the state of remaining forever beyond that which one wishes to know: to define a relationship, knowledge requires tension, waiting, evidence beyond the boundaries of the self and others.

As well as participating in the same historic, cultural debate, these authors – albeit with differences of theory and aesthetic – described the cultural atmosphere of mid-twentieth-century Europe in terms of the same, at times interweaving, themes.

3. After language has “departed”

The drawings are therefore particularly important: ten years after language had “departed” (Artaud 1947c, 1512), Artaud attempted to resurrect it through “an antilogical, antiphilosophical, anti-intellectual, antidialectical blast”, which he sought in “the pressure of my black pencil” (Rowell 1996, 55). With Artaud, the impossibility of finding the words to say and the experience of stumbling upon a thought that escaped him took the form of a scission, a separation from himself, from his time, from the whole history of literature. In truth, however, it is not a case of Artaud distancing, or dividing himself from the world, but rather a separation and a profound fracture that resided within him and that prompted him to seek, and seek himself, despite, in his perception, being forever unable to find himself. Looking at a first grouping of charcoal drawings from 1944, we encounter a greater spatial rigour, for all that the intersecting lines, curvilinear elements, and marks resembling horizontally and vertically oriented crosses, form agglomerations that create the sense of indecipherable, abstract bundles. The drawings of 1945-1946 are from Rodez, where Artaud was

confined between 1943 and 1946. His history of institutionalisation had begun in 1938 with a diagnosis of incurable paranoid delirium. His final years were spent at Ivry sur Seine, where he received support from friends including Bataille, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Dubuffet and even Pablo Picasso.

He returned to drawing towards the end of 1944, as we learn from a letter to Jean Paulhan dated 10 January 1945:

Je me suis mis à faire de grands dessins en couleurs. J'en ai envoyé deux à Jean Dubuffet qui m'avait demandé de les faire photographier et j'en ai achevé plusieurs autres. Ce sont des dessins écrits, avec des phrases qui s'encartent dans les formes afin de les précipiter. Je crois de ce côté être parvenu à quel chose de spécial, comme dans les livres et au theatre (Artaud 1945, 20).

The silence of the image, of the drawing, represented an opportunity to probe other physical, emotional, and psychic and mental landscapes beyond writing. Writing, when present, is fragmentary, the words losing their meaning, disappearing, dissipating among the images.

This step away from the written word was something he had already explored in the theatre:

Quand je dis que je ne jouerai pas de pièce écrite, je veux dire que je ne jouerai pas de pièce basée sur l'écriture et la parole, qu'il y aura dans les spectacles que je monterai une part physique prépondérante, laquelle ne saurait se fixer et s'écrire dans le langage habituel des mots ; et que même la partie parlée et écrite le sera dans un sens nouveau (Artaud 1935, 572).

The need was therefore to document (Artaud himself called his drawings "documents") but to document what?

Mes dessins ne sont pas des dessins mais des documents, il faut les regarder et comprendre ce qu'il y a *dedans*, à ne les juger que du point de vue artistique ou véridique, objet parlant et réussi, on dirait: cela est très bien mais ça manque de formation manuelle et technique et M. Artaud comme dessinateur n'est encore qu'un débutant, il lui faut dix ans d'apprentissage personnel ou à la poly-technique des beaux-arts. Ce qui est faux car j'ai travaillé *dix* ans le dessin au cours de toute mon existence mais je me suis désespéré du pur dessin (Artaud 1946, 1049).

What he wanted was to "step outside the forms, lines, outlines, shadows, colours, the features of modern painting without representing

anything or making any claim of unity in accordance with any sort of visual or material law” but instead creating “above the paper a kind of counter-figure that would be an ongoing protest against the laws of the created object” (Artaud 1995, 67).

In the drawings made between December 1944 and 1946, we find foetuses emerging from all parts of both male and female bodies, dismembered figures, fragments of objects that become human, and humans deformed by prosthetic objects. What is more, Artaud has traced and retraced the edges of the figures in pencil or charcoal, producing a fragile, uncertain, indefinite line that could never be considered a boundary.

Then there are letters, inscriptions, loose syllables from broken words, babblings that are both the silence of the word and the writing of the unreadable. In the space defined by these vestiges, these no-longer-present beings and substances (people, identities, things of memory, nightmares, ghosts and, last but not least, recognisable in many of the drawings, Artaud himself), it is possible to discern a sort of physical and conceptual dispersion that opens the surface of the text (of the drawn-upon, or written-upon page) to the, as yet unopened, “drawers” of the mind, as he called them.

In the drawing *L'homme et sa douleur* (April 1946), a fleshless, disarticulated figure is rendered in the most essential lines, lines that hint at a movement in space through the contradictory positions of what remains of the arms and legs. This is, Artaud says, “his pain” (Artaud 1947d, 1260). Yet, there is not just this single individual, but also a sort of alter ego that can be identified in the small figure that tumbles head first into the void.

A figure and its double, even when reduced to a minimal state, are indicative of a relationship between two distinct moments of the same condition: the man with his pain, and the other, who – having left pain behind, is now weightless, and at the mercy of nought but the force of gravity – precipitates into the abyss where, with no sense of tragedy, he wanders like a shadow. Above the swollen belly of the upright figure is a nail, a motif that occurs in other drawings from this period such as *Totem* (also of April 1946); the thighs are burdened by “dumbbells” according to the commentary written by Artaud to describe this very drawing and given to the doctor Latrémolière. The nail is, indubitably, a metaphor for pain. It is in these years, at Rodez, that

Artaud was subjected to around 51 administrations of electroconvulsive therapy, which fractured vertebrae and led to the loss of almost all his teeth. Yet, in the midst of this “treatment”, he rediscovered, in his drawing, the desire to prove himself. That Artaud hated the therapy, and found it painful, is in no doubt. In numerous letters, he reports no longer being in a fit state to think, able to do nothing more than direct the “formidable internal ebullitions”: he was, he claimed, seeking a means to “remake a body”, and these drawings were the very instrument he needed to rediscover a physical dimension.

Je pose la question du dessin, de l’art, du travail, de mon âge, de ma situation, de la vie, de ma vie, de ma situation dans la vie, / et je dis: /j’ai sué, peiné, transpiré, /ai-je ou non transpiré sur ce dessin (Artaud 1947e, 1501)

In *L’être et ses foetus*, another drawing produced around the end of 1944 and the start of 1945, he depicts a crowded space in which – in a mass of naïf, childish figures inscribed almost entirely in pencil (with very little colour, green and a faded red) – beings are born and multiply in many and varied directions. Foetuses emerge from women, but also from spiky-rayed suns, from bones, from objects and, perhaps, from words. These foetuses lend the space a sort of dynamism, but there is a sense of obsession, a sort of *horror vacui* that invokes a state of anguish and anxiety. Are pain and madness to be found here? There are a lot of bones, a lot of figures. The space is saturated, almost as though it has been filled to make it as asphyxiating and oppressive as possible. There are women and bone-women, but it is not the iconography that draws out the meaning hidden in the title. How could Artaud have gone about representing an idea? Here, in this drawing, and in similar fashion in *Jamais réel et toujours vrai* (January 1945), it is the stratification of multiple layers of elements and meaning that gives rise to a process that is more self-examination than understanding. What is at stake? In these drawings from the end of 1944 and into 1945, the figures are rendered in especially childlike fashion, devoid of skill, which was a quality that Artaud claimed to have rejected on more than one occasion. What there is, however, is a will to understand the birth of figures, of marks, of entities. It is a drawing about birth and growth, above all the birth of the mark that traces on the page the very desire to understand the construction of a language that seeks out lines and words

among forms and voids. The body that makes that mark, the body of Artaud, is loaded with tensions and contradictions, but also, simultaneously, with lucidity and eccentric intelligence. Like Giacometti, Artaud harnesses the line and mark to probe psychic and mental states, realms of the visible and the invisible that remain, always, as vestiges of the inability to ever reach the definitive outcome of a thing. Giacometti claimed that, in his long years of artistic exploration, he had made – sculpted, drawn and painted – a great many heads. The question he put to himself lay in asking why he had not succeeded to realize a head. Artaud, meanwhile, drew that which he had not managed to express with words. What is it that was closed off to him? None of the figures in these drawings is filled in at all; they are defined entirely by their edges. A drawing, more than a painting, is record of a process, of a work in progress by which the subjecthood of the person wielding the pencil is also created. As with Julia Kristeva's "subject in process", which found an effective example in Artaud, the body here is not described, the subject is not recognisable; rather, it is born, it grows and develops by creating and investigating the micro-space of the page, in which a whole universe can be presented. All the same, the body is present in what is perceived to be the core emotional component of these drawings: the search to find a presence without invading the space, the desire to set off on a path that is, before anything else, the search for the self in the other that is being drawn. Such records are more important than the definitive, conclusive mark with which one might assert the end of a project. Here, there is no end, and the drawing remains "in progress", in the vortex of tensions and opposing forces that make it impossible to identify a unified solution. In 1921, in the periodical «*Demain*», Artaud had expressed himself in almost the same terms:

Pourquoi peint-on? On peint pour dire quelque chose et non pour vérifier des théories. [...] Le sujet importe peu et aussi l'objet. Ce qui importe, c'est l'expression, non pas l'expression de l'objet, mais d'un certain idéal de l'artiste, d'une certaine somme d'humanité à travers les couleurs et les traits (Artaud 1921, 31-32).

4. Beyond the boundaries

Christine Buci-Glucksmann has spoken of two types of dispute, taking as her starting point the meaning attributed by Jean-François Lyotard to *Le Différend* (Buci-Glucksmann 2000, 13). The more violent form is,

of course, that which was experienced in the last century, the destruction of the other and the perverse manifestations of genocide; the other – more subtle, yet more profound – is concerned with language. This differently violent form of dispute, which is played out over and over again through time, produces stratifications and instances of removal that emerge in the traumatic identity of pain and, at times, of madness. It is concerned with language and, as Buci-Glucksmann observes, with that which we understand as reality.

Language is an act of responsibility; to call something by its name is to make and act through words. Stratified in the, physical as much as mental, language that expresses but can also fail to express – not because it lacks words, but because it fails to find the words through which the thing that is to be said can take form – we find memory, absences, repeated but unanswered questions, abysses of unfulfilled desire, or of desire that, responding to explicit and implicit forms of violence, has been alienated from us.

This is what Artaud had understood: his madness was a means to push back the boundary that impedes us from making language present, from making it entirely our own: to be language and not be removed from it. His drawings “wrote” a different language, one that could give voice to the short circuits of the mind and his own psyche.

To push back these boundaries, he brought his own mental “health” into play, stepping over the threshold between pain and the absence of pain to experience this boundary, to perceive the full possibility of possessing pain, of identifying oneself in it. Beyond even the Second World War, the historical trauma that lies at the root of the postmodern age is undoubtedly both tragic and horrific; it has permeated and unbalanced our awareness, even in those of us who seem to have forgotten. But the trauma to which Artaud bears witness is not simply historical: it resides within consciousness, in the folds of sensibility, becoming manifest – with intermittent interruptions – among the emotions, without managing to transform any of them entirely. It is written at a profound level, but cannot be read. The madness and pain of which these drawings – and the imagery they produced – are, therefore, the visible marks are the madness and pain of every individual who continues to seek the words with which to speak: alternative words that do not yet exist and that, in the void that they leave, evoke a sense of uncertainty in the face of all kinds of limits, including the

boundaries of language. Artaud's drawings are words that have been sought out and used to say that which it seemed could not be said. And it is just this very failure to remain within the boundaries of "language" that produced the madness. Madness was not a consequence, then, but a device that Artaud turned to his own use in his attempt to move past language, into the folds, the gaps, the voids within it. What is expressed in his work is therefore not the condition of an individual, but the condition of a consciousness that, as Artaud himself tried to explain, from Nietzsche to Van Gogh, had returned to take form once more. It is not madness, then, in the sense of a medical pathology. Rather, it is a presentiment that, in the case of Artaud, took the form of invented, babbling languages, of word-drawings, of "whispered" words. It is therefore the work of Artaud that, as Michel Foucault observed, should pose the thinkers of the twentieth century

la plus urgente des questions, et la moins susceptible de laisser le questionneur échapper au vertige, dans cette œuvre qui n'a cessé de proclamer que notre culture avait perdu son foyer tragique, du jour où elle avait repoussé hors de soi la grande folie solaire du monde [...] La belle rectitude qui conduit la pensée rationnelle jusqu'à l'analyse de la folie comme maladie mentale, il faut la réinterpréter dans une dimension verticale; alors il apparaît que sous chacune de ses formes, elle masque d'une manière plus complète, plus périlleuse aussi cette expérience tragique, qu'elle n'est pas cependant parvenue à réduire du tout au tout (Foucault 1972, 40).

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