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“A Stimulus to Work”

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I am going to make a few remarks on writing and reading based on a project of mine on ants as social insects. The original purpose was to find appropriations for my own writing work from the work of ants, from the path formation, the organization of the ant colony, communication, decision-making in task allocation, building activity, etc.

The title for these remarks could be “a stimulus to work” — it is a reference to the work of French entomologist Pierre-Paul Grassé concerning the labor of termites, but it suits that of ants, too.

And what did Grassé find? He showed at the end of the 1950’s that in ant work there is neither a “whole,” which explains the behavior of the parts, nor the opposite, that each individual in ant work would behave as if it were alone.

Grassé showed that there is an indirect communication taking place among individuals in a social insect colony; a kind of a group effect that not only involves a stimulus-response sequence, but leads to coherent and coordinated structures. Let’s say the building work (in-progress) was a stimulating configuration that triggered an accelerating response to work (continuing as an endless amount of local decisions without any idea of the so called “whole”).

So, there is a transforming configuration that leads to another configuration, which may in turn trigger another, possibly different one, etc. Also, the rules of the proceeding work change according to the terrain and environment.

The work is therefore neither a random assemblage nor a blindly mechanistic activity.

I began my ant project when working on my novel *One Thousand and One* (which came out in Finnish in 2016) in order to cope with the interconnectedness (of the reality or realities to be described) and multiplicity of my materials, as well as the ways in which the past is layered upon the present.

What intrigued me in ant work was how a symphony orchestra plays a symphony without scores, without a conductor, without a controlling center, matrix, model, imagination, receipt, without a small architect or construction-creating-demon or obscure instinct.

Every once in a while I tried to read something related to the project, though these readings were so-called weak readings, simply to try to notice something that otherwise would have gone unnoticed.

I will focus here only on one device, what I call a local decision, which is always also the moment of a stimulus to work.

In *Petrolio*, Pier Paolo Pasolini's late prose work, Pasolini uses a term, "brulichio," swarming, as a structural model of his work, as well as in connection with the impossible effort to capture the totality of reality and its multiple and contradictory features (something he believed Dante had managed to do in his work based on the entire system of thought of his time).

As a result, in *Petrolio*, there is a kind of refusal of reference to reality, and the consequence (what happens in the text) often resembles the self-organizing processes in biological systems, like those of ants.

In the same continuum with *Petrolio*, Pasolini wrote an important small work, *La Divina Mimesis* (published by Contra Mundum in English in 2014). It is a key work regarding these issues. It begins as a remake of Dante's *Inferno* — and to summarize briefly the first steps of my reading of the work:

No more any "whole" to attain, the local decisions here involve not only how writing would (again) be possible or how to find the way out from a linguistic impasse — they include also (in this case) the figure of a guide (connected to memory), though the guide is the double of the poet himself (his former self), and the figure of the guide implies a new fervor, faith, desire to act, even joy as a part of writing.

So, my reading went further with keeping an eye on swarming, repetition, and memory.

At this point I have to mention that we know very little about ant memory.

However, during the 70s, a Finnish myrmecologist, Rainer Rosengren, conducted work on red wood ants (*Formica rufa*), suggesting that ants pass on a collective memory. Foraging trails lead from the nest into trees where the ants drink the honeydew excreted by aphids. Rosengren found that in the spring, old ants, which survived the winter, lead young ants out on the preferred trails. When the old ants die, the young ants have adopted the trails, and the same action will be repeated the next spring, etc. In this way the colony remembers the trails for decades.

Another reading: In *Towards the One and Only Metaphor*, Miklós Szentkuthy writes that his aim is to write a *Catalogus Rerum*, an Index of Entities. The book can be read like a collection of epigrams, fragments, piece after piece, but actually Szentkuthy is also reflecting the process of his writing, speaking of how his works belong to the category of biological forms, or how nature doesn't recognize any difference between result and process.

With Szentkuthy a local decision could be described as an entry — an entry in a context of wild, all-encompassing, absolute imitation — as Szentkuthy writes in the beginning of the book: "... above all, these million lines, the analytical richness, of foliage, grasses, and nameless meadow flowers" — and entry also in the context of what he considered his major work, a gigantic diary of more than 100,000 pages (still unpublished even in Hungarian).

In every entry there is always a feeling of freedom, chance, and randomness, but when structures expand, a kind of principle of probability emerges — a kind of latent interweaving of all different paths, somehow often intersecting each other — there's often a specific kind of movement in the text, at the same time centrifugal and centripetal, creating a sort of *spira mirabilis*, very much like in an ant colony.

And my own writing project. At some point I felt I was totally beaten by ants. I had struggled hard, and I remember when I read from a recent study that, contrary to biblical wisdom, ants are idle and lazy, not at all hardworking; when there's a local decision to make, 20 to 50% of the ants decide simply to do nothing.

These obstinate, Melvillean *would-prefer-not-to* ants were a decisive blow to my efforts, though in retrospect, I wish the project was not a complete failure; at least it brought into my novel its traces and structures.

And as *A Thousand and One* in many ways copes with the theme of survival, perhaps the lesson of the fable could be found in the fact that if ants were to disappear, I mean if all ants were to disappear from the biosphere, in a very short span of time, the whole biosphere would become uninhabitable.