

## **TO DEINON: THE PROBLEM OF THE UNFAMILIAR IN EUROPEAN CULTURE**

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**Abstract:** The Unfamiliar has countless meanings in European culture, provided by ancient philosophy and medieval thought: otherness, monstrosity, undifferentiated, being generally perceived as a source of individual and collective fears. In the heroic adventure of self-knowledge, the encounter with the Unfamiliar marks the stages of spiritual evolution. Among the reference aspects of the Unfamiliar, I chose the Incomprehensible (the state of unfamiliarity of reason in relation to the sacred space), the Ontological Inevitable (death as the ultimate metamorphosis), and Fear (as a triggering factor of the protean instinct for self-preservation).

**Keywords:** the unfamiliar; the incomprehensible; the inevitability; the fear

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### **A. The incomprehensible as unfamiliar**

The separation between the divine space and the human space occurs in the emergence from the indistinction of being, in *polemos* (struggle). The struggle indicates (the Greek verb is *edeixe*) a combative separation from being, poetically expressed by Sophocles in *Antigone*, verses 332-375: "Many forms adorn the unfamiliar, but nothing beyond man, more unfamiliar, rises while moving"<sup>1</sup>.

The unfamiliar expressed in superlative by the Greek term *to deinotaton* indicates the extreme limits, the abyss of being. *Deinon* is the dreadful, in the sense of overwhelming dominance, which provokes fear, dread, shyness, silence, retreat (in Christian philosophy, an equivalent term could be *bathos*, from the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite<sup>2</sup>. Dionysian *bathos* is a terrifying abyss, into which the mind descends with humility in the pursuit of self-knowledge. In the depths of humility-*bathos tapeinoseos*, the human *nous*, submerged as in a primordial abyss, finds the indications of the inner divine Kingdom, whose presence in human beings is paradoxically expressed through

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<sup>1</sup> Sofocle, *Antigona* (București: Albatros, 2002), 332-375

<sup>2</sup> Pseudo Dionisios Areopagitos, "Teologia mistică", în *Opere complete* (Iași: Polirom, 2018), 252.

the metaphor of super-lightning darkness- the unfamiliar darkness of ignorance, of noetic limits (*gnōfōs*), illuminated by the divine presence)<sup>3</sup>.

Man is *To Deinon* to the extent that he remains exposed to the overwhelming existence, which awakens the feeling of the numinous (awe and fear), but also in the sense that he acts violently against the overwhelming. The unfamiliar is an extraction from the usual, from the known. Man is *deinotaton* - the unfamiliar at its highest degree because he desires to surpass limits, which is the fundamental trait that encompasses the others. In *Antigone*, verse 360, man "goes out into the open, being everywhere on the road – the ancient Greek term *pantoporos*, helpless and without an exit, comes to nothing..." *Pantoporos* means 'being before all possible paths, placed in the position of choosing, passing through/to any possible road.' The terms in *Antigone* are synonymous with a likewise complex noun: *metairesis* as a state of passing from, toward..., and with *xenos kai parepidemos*- foreigner and traveler on earth (Hebrews 11,13; 1Peter 2:11). Man carves his path toward anything (the example of *polithropy*, Odyssean versatility), ventures outside familiar, known references, assuming his unfortunate state; (the difference between classical *pantoporia* and Christian *parepidemia*, respectively *apoloutriosis*—the Gnostic alienation<sup>4</sup> signifies the journey from spirit to matter as a sum of temptations, but also as a necessity for complete knowledge, of exploring good and evil).

In *Antigone*, verse 370, Sophocles constructs another expression that is difficult to translate: *hypsipolis apolis*. *Polis* indicates the city, the territory in reference, a familiar *topos*, a place from which and for which history occurs. *Apolis* means without a city, without a reference, without law, without border, without shelter, without purpose. *Apolis* designates the necessity of the founding act, of the heroic founding adventure. The sea and the wasteland are associated with the prektiziological stage, both in classical Greco-Latin literature and in Christian literature.

Any beginning as a creative act is unfamiliar and violent; it is followed by development, familiarization, the proodic process of expansion, followed by the gradual withdrawal of the Creator from Creation, the emergence of an intermediary, the censorship of the immanent. The danger may consist in repetitive exaggeration, to the point of mutilating the initial greatness; for this reason, contemporaneity with the original past enters the sphere of mystery, of the unfamiliar, of prohibition. Therefore, the unfamiliar must constitute a compensatory aspect of the familiar, not an alternative to it. An example can be the work of Sebastian Brandt, *Narrenschiff*: the definitive breaking of the Ship of Fools from the familiar shore opens the way to Narragonia, to the loss of connections with the units of measurement of the real. To know the origins

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>4</sup> Henry L. Mansel, *Ereziile gnostice din primele două veacuri* (București: Herald, 2008), 169-203.

means to delineate, to establish a system of reference, to understand the mutual belonging of the familiar and the unfamiliar<sup>5</sup>.

The unfamiliar is the expulsion from one's own essence, either towards an external reference system (*hypsipolis apolis, topos atopou, Narragonia*), or towards a monstrous interiority, where *polemos* is the exit from indistinction as a sign of progress, individuation, or, conversely, of loss of self. In both cases, *polemos* involves the struggle with the inner monster or the pact with the inner monster. The struggle with the monster indicates the acceptance of one's own sacredness, the dimensioning of inner space from the heroic perspective of the relationship with the sacred and implicitly of salvation, self-rescue, immortality; the pact with the inner monster indicates the acceptance of ephemerality and the dimensioning of inner space from a thanatic perspective. Therefore, *pantoporos aporos* could mean the assumption of the oscillating insituating in one's own essence, being at home and not at home, while *parepidemia* refers to the search for the absolute reference.

In Homeric literature, venturing out to sea signifies the adventure of renouncing limits, abandoning known reference systems, and reversing familiar perspectives. By discovering the path to what is unfamiliar, overwhelming (*edidaxato*), man finds the way to himself through letting go of the familiar and constraints (the episode of Odysseus's encounter with Calypso in the *Odyssey*). In the myth of Oedipus, the unfamiliar is associated with anomaly and monstrous undifferentiation<sup>6</sup>: Oedipus killed his father and married his mother. Mythical undifferentiation can provide cosmological clues: in the beginning, the sky and the earth were not separated, fresh water and salt water were mixed, day was confused with night, laws and norms were not defined. Primordial undifferentiation is followed by conflict and sacrifice.

The undifferentiated monstrous combines elements borrowed from multiple forms of existence. But the terriophysiomorphic structures aspire to specificity, which can only be achieved through sacrificial violence. The monster results from a fragmentation of the perceived fact, a decomposition followed by a recomposition that disregards natural specificities<sup>7</sup>. The monster is a hallucination, a specter, an antimime of a sequence of reality, which tends to crystallize into stable monstrous specificities. Heroes sometimes exhibit monstrous traits (Heracles with the head of the Nemean lion), anomalies (Cecrops is androgen), fall prey to madness, and break norms. But the mythical narrative always introduces a correction or a succession of cathartic corrections (the myth of Oedipus).

The dilemma of pacting with the unfamiliar, the undifferentiated, like the dilemma of forgiving the anti-hero, emerges closely linked with the

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<sup>5</sup> Sebastian Brandt, *The Ship of Fools* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2024), 194-195.

<sup>6</sup> Sofocles, *Oedipus Rex* (Iași: Artemis, 2013), 45.

<sup>7</sup> R. Girard, *Țapul ispășitor* (Iași: Nemira, 2000), 49.

alternative of self-forgiveness, complicity with oneself or, on the contrary, self-condemnation (Cain-Abel), alongside the exaggerated mistake associated either with original sin or with antecedent sin. Thus, the myth of antecedent/original sin is related to the myth of the betrayed hero, within a subjective (fictional) mythical narrative. The stage of self-forgiveness or self-blame and self-condemnation follows. The punishments can be exile, theromorphism, physiomorphism (transformation into a plant, stone, object), as a form of removal, denial, release from oneself or regression (recognition?) of the theromorph, atavistic, totemic Self.

The unfamiliar is the unconscious memory of our repressed, infantile, archaic impulses. The unfamiliar is the gateway to the kingdom of fear that produces monsters. However, the absolute expression of the unfamiliar is death. Coexistence with the thanatic Unfamiliar is only possible through eschatological optimism and a redefinition of the notion of Destiny, achievable through initiation. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, the determination of the essence of man remains interrogative. The inquiry is related to the essence of history<sup>8</sup>. The question regarding man is historically meta-physical (being correlated with the problem of being). Anthropological determinations start from the co-affiliation of the verbs *to be* - *to understand*.

From the Parmenidean perspective<sup>9</sup>, *noein* means occurrence, by relating to history. Man steps in front of history as an interrogation and occurrence, then becomes *zoon logon erbon* - a being that bears *logos*. To the extent that he is interrogative-historical, man reaches the Self and is a Self. The Selfhood can be defined as the obligation to find a stable posture within the bounds of history. Being is, in the Heideggerian spirit, a state of gathering together, *logos* with a structuring role (dike). The Creator begins in the unspoken, erupts in the unthought, makes the unseen visible. He dares. Creation is audacity (gr. *tolma*), a search for authenticity<sup>10</sup>. Man is continuously thrown on to the path of a violent detachment, beyond himself, into the expanse of being, which he must bring into the flow of history<sup>11</sup>.

The *logos* is the exit from non-manifestation, from concealment<sup>12</sup>. Parmenides associates *logos* with *krinein*- to distinguish, to select (the Parmenidian verb *krinein* is synonymous with the Aristotelian verb *fronein*, a verb of wisdom in action). *Legein* and *noein* as a gathering together of opposites and comprehension indicate a violent action, followed by a terrified or cautious retreat, a return to the state of concealment that guarantees the possibility of a

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introducere în metafizică* (București: Humanitas, 1999), 188.

<sup>9</sup> Platon, "Parmenide", în *Opere VI* (București: Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1989), 130a10-130e7.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, *Introducere în metafizică*, 209-212.

<sup>11</sup> F. Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides* (London: Trubner & Co., 1939), 82-85.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, *Introducere în metafizică*, 228-229.

new manifestation, of a new appearance, of a new creative state<sup>13</sup>. Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, Verse. 1224: *me fynai ton apanta nika logon* = not being, logos triumphs overall. The inaugural *logos* accompanies the manifestation of essence.

In Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, *fysis* (being) becomes *Idea* (*eidos*). The Idea is the perspective offered by a thing. *Eidos* is the aspect, as reaching the present, the form in which something presents itself to us<sup>14</sup>. The Idea is an openness, an elevation of being, starting from itself; from the anthropological perspective, it is the visible part of what reaches presence, starting from itself. In the Greek term *idea*, the essence (*ousia*) and existence (the Greek verbs *einai*, *estin* - in present indicative) reside. The Idea constitutes the being of existence. *Fysis* as *Idea* is authentic existence. The Idea becomes *paradeigma* (a model of life, an existential anchor).

In Christian thought, being is the result of the divine procreative impulse. The act of being as a result of coming forth from the divine Self is premeditated, thought out. The divine essence manifests as a property simply present. In Christianity, the relationship of *logos-ousia* as a gathering of apparently contradictory manifestations is evident in the doctrine of the Trinity's intermobility of the hypostases (*perichoresis*) and in the doctrine of Christ's theandric nature. *Ontoos on* is the permanent being, in opposition to the changing appearance and becoming. Therefore, permanence opposes becoming, and the Idea opposes appearance. Becoming and appearance are determined starting from essence (*ousia*), which is defined in relation to the *logos*, with judgment as a statement (*dianoia*). Becoming and appearance are constituted from the perspective of thought.

## **B. The ontological inevitability as the Unfamiliar**

The ontological inevitability - *kata to chreon*, that which is obligatory, that must happen, that which differentiates the Creator from Creation, the sacred from the profane, the divine from the human is death. How can the human being tame the thanatic destiny?

- By defining and exploring the inner sacred space (as a heroic adventure of self-knowledge),

- by adhering to the group's daimon (in the orgiastic mystery religions - the cult of Dionysus, the cult of Cybele, the adept experiences ecstasy, an exit from self, unity with the God as a mystical one, and the noumenal is replaced by enthousiasmos, the frenzy of joy in the encounter with the God/Goddess. The group's destiny is thus rounded off, integrated into a divine dasmos, a divine order. Adhering to the group's daimon results in entering into ontological indistinction (the initiate becomes *entheos* - a part of the god, 'in god',

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 236-237.

its destiny being reconfigured in the collective sense, in terms of immortality. The cult of Mithras and the cult of Demeter from Eleusis seem to propose, however, the emergence from the indistinction of group consciousness and the definition, delimitation of affirmative individuality, within a moral reference system, having the value of sacred law.

The stages of forming self-assertive individuality could be:

1. Collective *noumenon*, expressed through participation in sacred ceremonies, ritual dance, mimetic gestures that express placement beyond oneself, in a continuous identity flow, from *chronos adylos* - the foundational time, with the present being perceived as an "extension" of the mythic past. From this magical, sympathetic, supra-individual continuum, self-affirming identities shape themselves.

2. Collective and particular mnemonic landmarks: totem, guardian deity, common ancestors, heroes; dream-images and memory-images, which particularize the initiatory trajectories.

3. The internalization of the initiatory process in a sacred inner theater, dominated by familiar archetypal figures: the Great Mother, the Founding Hero, the Wise Old Man, the Magician, the Terioform Antihero (the Monster).

4. The relationship Memory-Identity-Destiny, defined from the perspective of human dipsychistic structure<sup>15</sup>.

The man has two souls: *eidolon* (*psyche*), which leaves the body at the moment of death in the recognizable form of the deceased, manifesting itself in the dream space, and *thymos* which carries vital force in the World of Shadows, its vehicle being blood. *Eidolon* recovers its intellect (*frenes*), memory, through the consumption of blood (the episode in the Odyssey, where the hero invokes the shadow of Tiresias, through a blood offering). Therefore, self-awareness is directly related to *thymos*. *Eidolon* is the soul as the subject and object of knowledge (the King), while *thymos* is the soul as the principle of movement (the Hero). The negative aspect, the shadow of *eidolon*, is the individual, monstrous *ker-daimon*. The mystic god in the guise of the group's *daimon* is the force that ensures the communion of the worshipers.

The stakes of the mystery cults seem to be the transcendence of the constraining, thanatic individuality. The crossing of the boundary between the human realm and the divine realm, between temporality and immortality, is achieved through sacred drama. Therefore, adherence to a mystery cult can be explained by the necessity of discovery and transcendence of individuality, of relating to the life of a whole formed by group and god, of moving from individual identity to a transidentity obtained through adherence to the initiatory group and identification with the God. To be *entheos* means to exceed the limits set by Moira, to have more than what has been assigned to you (*hyperbasia*), to be greedy for immortality (*pleonexia*, in a spiritual sense).

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<sup>15</sup> F. Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides*, 123.

In Greek Misteries, self-affirmation through communion with the Goddess takes place on a dual level:

-Moiras as the discovery of one's own attributes, as self-definition in an immediate social context and in an eschatological context,

-the polychronous delimitation of self as an assumption of tradition, situating oneself in the social context of the city, achieving eschatological success. At Eleusis, destiny seems to acquire the meaning of *dasmos*, which granted the initiate the privilege of a special relationship with the present time and eternity, mediated by the freedom of self-affirmation in the present and in the *eschaton*.

### C. Fear as a form of manifestation of the Unfamiliar

In Greek thought, there are two terms that translate the sentiment of fear, in relation to the sacred and the profane: *numinous*<sup>16</sup> and *panikon*. The *numinous* expresses the generic sentiment of fear and admiration of the believer in the "proximity" of the divinity, the mixture of fear and love, the shiver felt by the creature in the presence of its creator. The *panikè deimìa* is the panic fear, the fear in the sense of *tremendum* - a paroxysmal form of fear, associated with an external cause, independent of the individual or the crowd. In a religious context, fear is the result of the contradiction between human selfishness and divine generosity, between the ephemeral nature of human condition and divine eternity. In a secular context, it is the consequence of a danger, of an individual or collective constraint.

An undeniable benchmark in the attempt to understand the meanings of fear in European culture is Michel de Montaigne<sup>17</sup> Michel de Montaigne. The feeling that ensures the connection between protean individualism, the mechanisms of identity metamorphosis, and the need for solitude is, in the text of the *Essays*, fear. Fear is the source of dissociation from the self: "Doctors say there is no other passion that can more easily drive us out of our minds." For Montaigne, "to be driven out of one's mind by fear" (*devenus insensés de peur*) means to skew the imagination towards the fantastic. Fear causes the imagination to slide between a realm of mythic fantastic and one of reality's duplication. It can be a source of extreme courage but also of death. Montaigne differentiates between the fear of the individual in a crowd and collective fear, a source of heroism or cowardice.

Paroxysmal fear suspends both reason and emotionality, placing human reactions in the realm of necessity. Montaigne analyzes the relationship between *kydos-anangke*, heroism-necessity as a relationship imposed by a constraining circumstance. The philosopher distinguishes between *numinos* - the shudder of

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<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Despre numinos* (București: Humanitas, 2006), 35.

<sup>17</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Eseuri*, I, XVIII (București: Humanitas, 2020), 68-69.

fear that the creature feels in the face of death, transience, eternity, as mysteries placed beyond the limits of reason and human prudence, and phobos/temeritas, the fear of something concrete; the difference between numinos as a reflex in the self-consciousness of the feeling of helplessness in the face of danger, and irrational panic, produced by the wrath of the gods.

Although he does not use any Greek or Latin terms, from the classical sources he evokes, the philosopher seems to attribute to panic the meaning of *tremendum* - a paroxysmal form of fear, associated with an external cause, independent of the individual or crowd. *Tremendum* is the paralyzing fear, related in the realm of Greek thought to which Montaigne refers, *to deimia panikon* (and to the Hebrew *emāt*, terror from *Exodus* 23:27). Montaigne does not analyze the forms of manifestation of panic using examples from the realm of religiosity, but in the historical events he chooses to explain its multiple valences, the meaning is synonymous with that suggested by religious literature.

At the beginning of *Essay I, XVIII*, Montaigne speaks about the fear of phantoms, the superstitious fear of the supernatural, synonymous with a tremendous degradation to the vulgar sense of 'insane' fear; then fear takes on the meaning of a tremor produced by a real, immediate danger that cannot be overcome rationally, but only through the force of instinct (as a form of self-preservation in the face of imminent danger); and at the end of the discourse, it attains the significance of *deimia panike* - the inexplicable, uncontrollable panic that causes unexpected metamorphoses. The degrees of intensity of fear are suggested by the examples chosen by the philosopher: folk tales and historical episodes of the Roman-Germanic and Roman-Egyptian wars.

For Montaigne, fear can be the source of self-abandonment, the source of *kydos* (heroic impulses), panic accompanied by confusion, inner disorder, restlessness, whose reversibility is conditioned by a religious ritual. Therefore, the philosopher constructs a hierarchy of fears, correlating the daemonic, spectral element at the beginning of the Essay with the divine anger that produces panic at its end. The source of *deimia panike*-type feelings (terror, 'stunning fears', 'whimsical passions') is the proximity of reason to religiosity, and the intrusion of overwhelming feelings into the personal space that are difficult to explain and to control.

The forms of manifestation of panic indicate a certain type of metamorphosis, a transition from the rational to the irrational. The epigenesis of fear as presented by Montaigne can be traced, both at the individual and at the collective level, as a sum of reactions generated by the same cause. Pompey's friends react similarly in the face of the Egyptian danger; in the first battle between Romans and Carthaginians, ten thousand terrified foot soldiers threw themselves into the midst of the enemy army; in Germanicus's war against the Goths, two troops of the Roman army collided while trying to flee the battlefield. Isolated individuals, under different circumstances, can react similarly in the face of the same type of danger (for example, the standard-



bearer in the House of Bourbon's war with Rome, the captain Julle's standard-bearer, or identical individual reactions in the face of the supernatural). There are therefore ways to recognize protean individuality<sup>18</sup>.

Fear, in all its forms of manifestation, seems to be a stimulus for imagination and an impulse given to individual protean capacity. Fear determines contextual metamorphosis, a reversible metamorphosis, saving or irreversible, thanatophoric. Fear can be the source of identity manifestations of an antimimetic type, which throws the individual to the opposite pole of their personality, but it can also take the form of panic that produces unexpected identity manifestations. *Deimia panike* places characters beyond what they know about themselves, in the realm of heroic or undignified alter egos. In a religious context, fear is the result of the contradiction between human selfishness and divine generosity, between the temporality of the human condition and divine eternity. In a secular context, it is the consequence of a danger, of an individual or collective constraint.

The panic that Montaigne speaks of at the end of the Essay, attributing its 'discovery' to the Greeks, is a Plutarchian concept - panikon, meaning terror panic, produced by the god Pan. Panic terror is the inexplicable, irrational, uncontrollable fear. The term panikon is a play on words that connects the feeling of paroxysmal fear to the therioform image of Pan, to the unpredictable 'panic' personality, and to the idea of metamorphosis as an escape from oneself, from the realm of reason. Montaigne seems to signal the individual capacity to oscillate between instinct and reason, as limits of human versatility.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 68-69.