

Exegi monumentum: Epistemological Significances of a Challenging Old Literary Wisdom

Ana Bazac*

Abstract: Horace's phrase is interesting for it draws attention to the purpose of intellectual creation. Intellectual creation is not analogous to intellectual activity, and the attitudes towards these two heterogeneous facts have complex significances for the human being as such, for different social strata/for society and for the question of the human manifestation. Intellectuals aim at a monument/to construct a monument, although only some of them do it. (And this situation generates different mentalities). But what does "monument" mean here? It is different from prestige or fame – and obviously it is quite the contrary to notoriety – and represents the characteristic of two intertwined acts; or better, it is the name (metaphor) of the system formed by the relationship of the intellectual with his/her concrete creation, and by the relationships between this creation and the competent communities capable to evaluate it. The first problem raised in the present analysis is the distinction between a finite literary work and an open scientific research. From this standpoint, we have to separate the finite "matter"/form/expression of the literary work and its infinite significances one may understand and constitute. We should also consider the different intentions backing the literary and scientific creations (the presumable intention in literature is the erection of an untouchable monument, while in science, researchers intend to contribute to a better cognizance of the domain or of the whole they have in view). Consequently, scientific theories and formulas change, while literary works as such remain unchanged. The second problem arises from the contradistinction between formal "scientific papers" and the free and sincere scientific research. Nowadays, the bigger the number of the former is, the less is the probability of important (monumental) contribution to science. An entire area of problems related to the freedom of and access to scientific research, literature and publishing houses and journals, as well as to the values and criteria of scientific and extra-scientific evaluation, and to the psychology of intellectuals (scientific researchers) has

* Ana Bazac (✉)

Division of Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science and Technology,
Romanian Academy, Bucharest, Romania
e-mail: ana_bazac@hotmail.com

to be considered. This last issue highlights an interesting philosophical concept, that of the ephemeral. Starting from a concrete observation of Nietzsche, three aspects are dealt with: the probable antagonism between the tendency of erecting a monument and the one of *carpe diem*; the contrast between man's ephemeral existence and his representation of science (and philosophy), as well as the real state of science; and man's struggle against the ephemeral in the real dialectical process of life.

Keywords: *exegi monumentum*, literature, Arendt, Nietzsche, science, intellectuals

INTRODUCTION

The problem raised here has to do with intellectuals. But they are defined indirectly, through the *results* of their activities, and not through the skills and competence in theory, in expressing judgements and manipulating intellectual tools such as logic, demonstration, experiments and falsification, scientific literature, hermeneutics and sensibility and ability to grasp significances and view new senses by comparisons and enlargements of the worlds focused on.

Neither are they defined from the standpoint of their relationships with the common people or communities they are supposed to represent. Or more precisely, intellectuals represent the communities they belong to and the ordinary people in two senses: that when they assume or not – this meaning *if* they express or not – the values of these communities and people, and that when they produce the values corresponding to these communities and people.

The first sense is not discussed here. However, we have to observe that, because of the heterogeneity of values within a society, one cannot characterise intellectuals according to some special values, say the progressive ones. Rather, each social class has “its own specialised category of intellectuals” (Gramsci 2001, 1138). As a consequence, they are “organic”, organically bound to the class they pertain to. But, though all of them have the function to give “homogeneity and awareness” to the class they belong to, some are “in connection with the dominant social group” (Ibid, 1141) – and thus are “functional”, by reproducing and legitimizing the dominant values (Kellner 1997), and organising “social hegemony and state domination” (Gramsci, 1143) – while others are “critical-oppositional intellectuals who oppose the existing order” (Kellner). Those who express – and not only tacitly support – their opinion are *engaged*, committed to their worldviews,

and this character is related to the critical-oppositional intellectuals, since it is more difficult to do this than to be *laudator temporis acti*.

The predominance of ones or the others is related to historical periods and relations of forces within them. For example, in the new trans-national phase of capitalism, to the huge power of capital, mostly financial, a neo-liberal/conservative ideology corresponds. And the more this phase flows into the system crisis and the power of capital could be at the same time surprisingly fragile, the neo-liberal ideology is more vocal and the public intellectuals are aggressively neo-liberal. While in the post-war triumph of welfare state and human rights, the most prominent intellectuals were those *engaged* (Einstein, Russell, Sartre, Fanon), equally criticising the contradictory and limited social-democratic politics.

This different situation led to a theory about the difference between the “legislator” intellectuals of modernity and rationalism, putting the problem of universal values, and the “post-modern” intellectuals (thus corresponding rather to the decrease of the welfare state phase and the rise of trans-nationalism or globalised capitalism) who saw the difficulties posed by universal values and are only the “interpreters” of texts, events, phenomena (Bauman 1987).

What is important is that the separation of intellectual activities from the other ones has its historical origin within the social division of labour, reflecting the low level of technology, and superposed by the political division between the rulers and the ruled. Once separated, the intellectual activities have constituted their specific and autonomy, and one aspect of this specific is just *the search for notable (and lasting) results*, in order to justify the superior social level occupied by the intellectuals, while another aspect is the submission of the intellectuals’ behaviour to the necessity to arrive at or keep up their social position. From this last standpoint, some of them are less vulnerable than others not only because of their already stable and well-off situation, but also because of the domain they are working within. But this picture is certainly historical, by reflecting at present (when the high level of technology allows a huge productivity and a high general intellectual level of work) the persistence of political division which imposes a quite large level of confusion and opportunism of intellectuals.

Finally, there is an obvious intercourse between the above-mentioned first and second sense of the representation by the intellectuals of some professional communities and common people:

the most significant intellectuals are those who have a big competence and thus they can produce the values necessary to communities and ordinary people. Related to this, the theory of value neutral competence is well-known, as well as its opposite. But to produce or assume the values of professional communities involve epistemic responsibility as well as moral responsibility, and this is valid in relation with society or common people too.

More precisely, Gramsci reminded that there is a hierarchy of intellectuals performing the production of values of communities or ordinary people, or only the manipulation of values. The first are the “creators of the various sciences, philosophy, art, etc.”, while others are “‘administrators’ and divulgators of pre-existing, traditional, accumulated intellectual wealth” (Gramsci, 1143).

THE PRESENCE¹ OF THE MONUMENT

“*Exegi monumentum aere perennius*”: “I’ve raised a monument, more durable than bronze”, said Quintus Horatius Flaccus in his *Odes*, Book III, XXX, referring to his own poetry, since he was “*princeps Aelium carmen ad Italos deduxisse modos*” / “the first to adapt the Aelian verses to Italian meters”. He drew attention to the result of intellectual creation, i. e. to the direct, “material” proof of intellectual activity, and at the same time he made the difference between the impression induced by and through intellectual activity – impression transfigured into fame, notoriety and influence – and, on the other hand, the concrete results of intellectual creation.

Thus firstly, as not every intellectual activity is at the same time intellectual creation, only the latter involves *unique* products, influential and *capable to change* the human mind and course of civilization. This distinction and the difficulty of creation² have generated many theories and attitudes: from the human model as a model of intellectual creator to the resignation of so many intellectuals who know that their activity is not/would not involve real creation. In

¹Presence is used here as a philosophical notion. It is the manifestation of the essence of existence, or even the manifestation of existence (παρ – near, nearby; ουσία – essence, substance, being, reality, element; παρουσία – presence), the fact to be in the world. Thus presence is more than the simple appearance of phenomena; it is the “sign” of their real essence.

² This also means – or somehow first and foremost – material and spiritual conditions, as well as opportunities for the individual.

this respect, their activity is similar to that of carpenters or weavers – without which our lives would not be entirely human but, leaving aside the importance and special imprint of different workers³, they do their best in a continuous process of human acting and they are *interchangeable*. In other words the results of their activity are not unique and are not bifurcation knots in the human evolution.

In a different view, this difference is not true: chaos theory has already demonstrated the existence of the butterfly effect, and consequently, we may state that every human being – and every behaviour and fact – is a “butterfly” on whose behaviour and facts the entire social system depends, in its near and farther realms (See so many warnings, as the one of László 2009)⁴. “*Non omnis moriar, Horace insisted, multaue pars mei vitabit Libitinam*”/ “I’ll not utterly die, but a rich part of me,/ will escape Persephone: and fresh with the praise/ of posterity, I’ll rise, beyond” (Horace).

But this could happen – and anyone could make this objection – not only because of an extraordinary intellectual creation: ordinary people know very well that they last in the memory of the dear ones and acquaintances according to their facts and sentiments (or rather attitudes manifesting their sentiments), and that to make a good work (Kotarbinski 1965), whether in woodwork or teaching, gives the right measure of the value of a human person and is what always adds to civilisation as its *humus* supporting the development of society.

What is more, according to Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, what is really specific to the human being is not the privately pursued fulfilment of the needs, rather through *labour* – but from this standpoint there is continuity between animals and people who, all of them, act for an endless task and consume the results – but the public sphere of dialogue, communication and political construction of the common condition. As we know, dialogue and communication are immaterial and perishable too, but they are the sign of the human nature and without them no institution and work can be realised. Arendt considered that *vita activa* is just the result of man’s evolving in the public sphere, and that the content of this active life – opposed to *vita contemplativa* which is only a philosophical idol constituted on the ground of necessity manifested in the private realm of economy and

³ We all are workers/working people, aren’t we?

⁴ However, today is clear that only “green business” and “new politics” fuelling the grassroots civic activism for beneficial objectives (and business, media and personal activism) are not enough.

biology – is the construction as such: of institutions and public values and relationships (and this construction involves the ephemeral), but also of what Popper (1978) calls “the third world”, the results of human creation: ideas, theories, stories, tools and artefacts, works of art, social institutions (and this construction involves the stable, the lasting). Furthermore, in the frame of this third world, *work*, as activity and *capo d’opera*, has its place. The evolution of man as *homo faber* (more than *homo laborans*) is *poiesis*, creation manifested through the work of art, surpassing the “utilitarian instrumentalism of fabrication and usage” (Arendt 1958, 174). But although the work of art consists in useless things, “objects which are unrelated to material or intellectual wants” (Ibid, 171), there is, however, a link with the good working of artisans.

Thus a good intellectual work doesn’t necessarily mean to create a masterpiece. However, this intellectual work, good or not, is similar to the ordinary labour aimed at fulfilling needs. The difference between an efficient activity and the creation of science, philosophy and art is given not only by the high *intellectual* characteristic of creation as such, and not only by its *lasting peculiarity* – as the difference between seeds and humus – but also by its *direct influence* on human culture and civilisation. While a good work has consequences only through the agency of people (who share it or are its beneficiaries, in their turn being able, or not, to create), i.e. it rarefies accordingly as it is transposed through and melts in new activities, intellectual creation emphasises a direct relationship between the new real objects created and the human creative process. Through intellectual creation, people enrich reality and may transform it by interposing between them and *existentia* the new objects which thus prove somehow materially the passing of their subject creators on the Earth.

In principle, an intellectual creation involves the concept, criterion and guiding mark of monument: it aims at a monument, at a monumental action and realisation. This is one of the reasons people have always had the artist, the philosopher, the scientist as a desirable human model.

But, as we know, not all intellectual activities create lasting objects (and I obviously consider as lasting the virtual objects of Karl Popper’s World 1 and World 3). There are intellectual activities such as the actors’, teachers’, even doctors’, which are rather ineffable, perishing

and ephemeral⁵. What would the monument signify in their case if not the metaphor of their transient creativeness? From this standpoint, a carpenter would create more lasting objects than an actor. But the actor or the teacher could have a more lasting impression and influence on much more people than the palpable and beautiful objects made by the carpenter. And the feelings and values resulted from the performance of actors and teachers are not only the exaltation of this performance by the receiver subjects: they are at the same time, or first and foremost and by including objective criteria of testifying them, conscious constructs of their providers.

Indeed, as Hegel considered, art (which includes also transitory manifestations) is the privileged manner through which the spirit becomes conscious of itself, and shows itself in spectacle (in a spectacular manner). Art has as its own goal to represent itself, to put our conscience within objects and to present it within a spectacle for the others. Thus art is of intelligible nature: the artist puts his/her conscience within the objects in order to show himself/herself to the others and to see himself/herself. But Hegel said that art is an important part of our past. If so, the actor's creation too could be a monumental part of our past.

Consequently, we'll discuss the presence of the guiding mark of monument from a topical point of view.

THE LITERARY WORK OF ART AND THE SCIENTIFIC CREATION⁶

Both are *unique* and reflect a long preliminary cultural process, including the reflection and instruction of the authors in concrete social and historical contexts. Both generate *intellectual cognitive structures*, as well as forms expressing meanings and relationships between different features of these forms and their denoted objects.

But, while we have to differentiate the infinite significances one may understand and constitute on the basis of a literary work of art, this one is not only "something that in itself is one and identical" (Ingarden 1973, 16), but also *finite*, and this *finished status* of every

⁵ Economics has developed the concept of services which are perishing activities, without traces (Arendt spoke about "servile activities"). But if the actor's performances are video/audio reproduced, these activities have traces.

⁶ In the present view, the literary work is the pattern of any work of art, while the analysis of science could be used to better understanding philosophy; but this is only a partial comparison.

piece of literary work is the basis of the continuous construction of meanings and critical conscience of the history of literary process. This characteristic arises from the specific literary creation: it is about “‘imaginational objects’, which are entirely dependent on [the writer’s] will”; these objects “radically differentiate any two literary works, and without them any such work would be impossible. ...they are not something ideal but are, as one may put it, forms of the author’s free fancy”. So, “the whole sphere of objects and states of affairs which constitutes, as the case may be, the model of the objects and states of affairs ‘appearing’ in the work must be excluded from the literary work” (Ibid, 17; 16; 25). As finished, the literary work is given once and for all, and its form is what has significances.

In their turn, scientific theories (as well as the elements – such as methods, theoretical instruments, proceedings, calculus and experiments – participating in the creation of theories) are not imaginational objects, and the will to imagine paths towards theories or theories as such is only one of the psychological capabilities needed to do research. Scientific theories, with included paradigms, are inherited structures of knowledge. But as Karl R. Popper (1994, 3) explained, always “the instruction comes from within the structure”. Being exposed to theoretical pressures, the cognitive structure allows new instruction, which also comes from within the structure and which consists in the emergence of new tentative theories in a cumulative process. From this standpoint, if the literary process supposes the addition of *discontinuous* finite moments/creations – the logic of no one requiring the precedent –, thus if discontinuity is rather what characterises it, scientific creation depends on the logic of scientific discovery, i.e. on the cumulative process of knowledge, on former theories and theoretical instruments; it rather means continuity.

Each cumulative process spreads within a scientific paradigm transmitted by a scientific education that is both rigid and rigorous, and consists in “the attempt to force nature into the conceptual boxes supplied by professional education”. This is the “normal science”, which “often suppresses fundamental novelties because they are necessarily subversive of its basic commitments”. But the scientific events (discoveries and new inventions of theory) which do not fit into the old paradigm push scientists to re-evaluate it and construct a new one, generated just by the fundamental novelties emphasized by the scientific events. Consequently, science is a succession of normal science within a coherent scientific tradition and scientific revolutions.

Scientific progress is allowed by the bricks produced by the normal science, bricks “forever adding to the growing stockpile of scientific knowledge”, as well as by revolutionary changes constituted from “discoveries that cannot be accommodated within the concepts in use before they were made”, and involving “some relatively sudden and unstructured transformation in which some part of the flux of experience sorts itself out differently and displays patterns that were not visible before” (Kuhn 2000, 13; 14; 17). Scientific change takes place with the help of logical instruments: the logic has to be clear and transparent and it sustains scientific means like experiments and demonstrations. In science, the logic must not be surpassed; it is the main instrument and criterion of validation. The scientific community confers on a theory a value of truth⁷ which appears after logical and clear demonstrations.

While a literary work is finished and its form appears as “absolute”, the scientific creation is a relative one and its reception presupposes the conscience of its unfinished and transitory status in the process of knowledge. But this aspect does not annul the fact that some theories are paradigmatic, or only of major importance, thus being possible to characterise them as monuments. As a result, although the presumable intention of every writer in literature is the erection of an untouchable monument, not everyone is capable of this performance. In science things are/seem to be different. Even though their intention is (only?) to contribute to a better cognizance of the domain or of the whole they have in view and therefore their professional pride does not get the form of the dream to erect a monument; in fact, some researches – or many, especially if we consider the chain of researches (or the collective character of researchers’ work) – are monumental. Consequently, scientific theories and formulas change, while literary works as such remain unchanged.

The importance of a theory, as well as of a literary work, is thus not the result of the finished or unfinished character of these intellectual objects, but is emphasised by competent communities which judge

⁷ As we know, Kuhn was not at all the partisan of the theory that science advances toward the truth, but that it progresses through paradigms that allow better puzzle-solving, thus understanding nature. This goal of puzzle-solving is what pushes towards the creation of paradigms – thus occurring through experiences. Strictly, the teleology of finding the truth is substituted with the randomness of practice and experiences. Broadly, we cannot say that practice, experience and their theoretical grasping do not have an inner classical teleology of truth, can we?

them according to their relevance to the process of human knowledge and development.

IN SEARCH OF SCIENTIFIC NOTORIETY

There are “*technical*” – i.e. related to the evolution of the post-war science, scientific instruments and researchers – and *social* causes of a controversial and even counter-productive aspect of the present scientific life. Indeed, the process of marketisation of the scientific research and university (I speak about the domain of humanities and social sciences, I don’t know the one of exact sciences, but, according to the next quote, there are similarities between them) in the last more than forty years, as well as the deepening of bureaucracy directing the research and university, have led to the purpose of researchers and university staff to publish more and more, and to be quoted by more and more fellows. This fact implies a ballast of so-called scientific products, which do not bring novelty at all (Bauerlein et al. 2010) but represent criteria of academic promotion.

As we know, a criterion to be accepted by a scientific journal is that of the quotes from the newest references, and especially from that journal. In other words, the author does no longer pursue the problem as such – and within the history of its solving – but the demanded quotes. In fact, this system gives the framework of his/her thinking: to pursue the possibility to be published, even though he/she writes something as a review. But in this case, the impression given by such an article could be a strong discontinuity in the cognisance and research on a problem: quoting only 1-2-3 recent articles, one cannot know the real process of research and the elements of continuity. As it is not acceptable to remain at references from decades ago, it is ridiculous to refer only to some latest works.

Consequently, beyond the downsides of the literature glut (see Trimble et al. 2010⁸), there is a lowering quality of quite many

⁸ “Because there is often so much to review, we suspect that the quality of refereeing is adversely affected. ...The mountain of redundant and often useless reading one must do to research any topic. The number of dubious/disputable ideas that are published ... Because there is far too much to read and carefully consider in contemporary literature, questionable ideas too frequently find their way past referees into print and go unchallenged by immediate commentary in subsequent issues of the journal. We see this dialectic as critical to the search for truth, but some journals do not encourage or even allow commentary. Once an erroneous concept gets into the literature and garners many citations, it becomes much more difficult to correct. And that creates even more glut. ...The financial load on libraries to make all this

scientific products. Although the freedom to research and the freedom to have access to scientific research, literature and publishing houses and journals is a major human right and it guarantees the increase of human creation, *the distance between the probability of monumental contributions of so many real or fake aspirants and the real glut amplifies*. Moreover, a conclusion of a research concerning the rate of “significant innovations per person” was that, despite the accelerating technical progress, this rate declined after its peak in 1873 (Huebner 2005).

This aspect questions the values and criteria of present scientific and extra-scientific evaluation, and challenges the prejudices of intellectuals and their psychology. And a main value is “discussion, argument, mutual criticism”, a “cultural conflict” between theories and *worldviews* and without which one cannot develop science (Popper 1994, 33-64). Scientific creativity manifests itself only through *transparent* propositions of scientific texts and theories, and only through *free criticism* that allows the comparison between them (thus theories are not incommensurable) and points out their real fertility. If all of these do not happen, i.e. scientific research is not honest and sincere, the results are sad for the entire society.

THE LUCID NIETZSCHE AND THE EPHEMERAL OF MODERNITY

Referring to “the first and last things”, Nietzsche had an idea between his pre-theoretical intuitions related to the modern society and its alienating pattern of the human person, the idea of the *ephemeral* (he did not name it). Indeed, there is a “disbelief in the ‘*monumentum aere perennius*’”, since modern people feel too intensively “the *contrast* between our excited ephemeral existence and the tranquil repose of metaphysical epochs” (Nietzsche 1908, 22). As a consequence, it is very difficult to think of a long research on truth; the modern man “wishes himself to gather the fruit from the tree that he plants and consequently he no longer plants those trees which require centuries of

‘information’ available to scholars... The neglect of the longstanding qualified literature... The present system consumes vast amounts of paper. Moreover, the cost of transporting, handling, and properly storing this mass is considerable. The present system is environmentally irresponsible... *Most important, the present culture breeds an entrepreneurial careerism, and thence a cynicism that is inimical to the true academic enterprise*. Indeed, we find the present culture to be pseudointellectual because it systematically diverts intellectual activity into more visible but less productive channels” (Trimble et al. 2010, 276-286).

constant cultivation and are destined to afford shade to generation after generation in the future” (Ibid).

Generally speaking, there is an antagonism between the tendency of erecting a monument and the course of life that seems to require only the *carpe diem*. Nietzsche did not know *why* and certainly *what to be done* in order to overcome this antagonism. But this contradistinction between the modern conditions – the appearance itself shows the path toward the mechanism – and the inner tendency of man and knowledge to tend towards monuments (i.e. monumental scientific and philosophic creations, as well as a true life) was a useful warning.

The above-mentioned antagonism is the reason of the contrast between man’s ephemeral existence and his representation of science (and philosophy). Science (and philosophy) is/are imagined as an essence which is different and separated from the real existence. The latter is ephemeral, while the former is/are the absolute and sure continuity of the human. But *there is obviously a social conditioning of this conception*; and an aspect is just the lack of responsibility concerning the real human life and the real state of scientific products, simultaneously with their idealisation. An extravagant distinction between appearance and real existence has allowed the coexistence of illusions regarding man, science and philosophy, and, on the other hand, the marketisation of the educational process that leaves not much room to dreams concerning the erection of monuments during the lives of ordinary people or fake intellectuals.

CONCLUSION

The social conditioning has to be questioned as regards the possibility of creative manifestation of intellectuals and, more, of ordinary people. There are not only technical conditions, but also social and political relations that constitute the frame of development. And if during the first industrial revolution, a phrase as that attributed to John D. Rockefeller: “I want not a nation of thinkers, I want a nation of workers” reflected the real state of division of labour (that presupposed a thin stratum of intellectuals as technical leaders of the labour of physical workers), the present industrial revolution rejects it. In fact, each normal human person is able to erect a monument in/through his/her life. But the social and political relations are those which draw back the psychological and technical basis of a creative and pleasant life of all; and as a consequence, in the real process of the present life people are not only impotent to erect monuments, but even despise

them. They are content to consume and it seems they forgot the reason to be of their lives: that to erect monuments.

Two last remarks: the *first* is that in front of the ephemeral – and at the same time the banality of the everyday life full of routine – to speak about monuments honouring the short intermezzo of random coagulations of matter, energy and information representing the human life seems inadvertent and ridiculous. But if we understand the deep meanings of the metaphor of monuments – actually even synonymous to the human lives explained above as unique creativity of each of them – it becomes precious, regaining its entire dignity intended by Horace. The monuments – possible, real or unfulfilled – are no longer reasons of joke, but of concerns. The *second* is that the flout towards the importance of “monuments” – i.e. of the human creativity, effort and creation – by a big part of the dominant layers who consider that their plagiarism is “normal” (since they have the power to do it; and since they do it, they think that all the researchers do) deeply attacks the widespread belief that what is left behind by people is just their honest effort to erect monuments. The moral relativism and the flout towards creation that is not lucrative – not directly and not immediately – are a poison thrown from above on the younger generations: who thus are guided to consider that their survival would be distinct from their creative power to erect monuments. But the human survival is absolutely depending on the human fulfillment of unique creativity.

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