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## Matila Ghyka's Memoires and Gustave Le Bon's Concept of “Dematerialization”

**Abstract:** The present essay analyzes to what extent Gustave le Bon's theories on the dematerialization of matter influence Matila Ghyka's own way of treating his biography (actual life and virtual “lives”) in both fictional and non-fictional works. What strikes the most in Matila Ghyka's style is a technique of extensive self-quotation, which is not mere egocentrism. Whereas le Bon does not discriminate between Force and Matter and states that Matter is an infinite reservoir of intra-atomic energy, in the particular case of Matila's writings, the degree in which textual matter (recollections, memories) dissociates or re-crystalizes indicates the actual force encapsulated in the point of departure (the object of recollection, experience as such). Textual series bring testimony to Ghyka's strive to burn out variants to invariant (Happiness, the Golden Ratio), to drive meaning to a state of transparency.

**Keywords:** Dematerialization, Matter, Ether, Dreams, Memories, Series

### Who is Matila Ghyka?

Supposing the readers of this essay have never heard of Matila Ghyka, I shall start by enumerating a list of names: Paul Valery, Leon-Paul Fargue, Marcel Proust, Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Lucien Fabre, Henri Poincare, Claude Farrere, Salvador Dali, and Gustave le Bon. The list can be broadened but, for reasons of space, I will just resume myself to saying that Ghyka was a very close friend to all these famous people.

Friendships let aside, Matila Ghyka himself is a fascinating figure of the Romanian diaspora of the 50' and 60', quite unknown to his fellow countrymen because of Communist censure and post-transition disregard. His books, both fiction and non-fiction, have been translated in Romanian but, with few exceptions (Gregori), did not arise much interest. One of the last Moldavian princes, Matila is the son of the Wallachian officer Matila Costiescu and Maria Ghyka, the niece of Prince Grigore Alexandru 5<sup>th</sup>, who ruled over Moldavia twice (1849-1853 and 1854-1856). His princely title is inherited from his mother's half-brother, Grigore Ghyka, who lost his only child in 1896. Being the unique male successor of the Moldavian prince's eldest son (Constantin), Grigore came with the idea of adopting Matila when, already a teenager, the latter was studying at the French navy school "Borda". Being the result of a rather artificial way of enforcing noble lineage, this title did not turn into a defining trait of his public identity. Also, it did not fulfill either prosperity dreams or social aspirations, even though, a man of the world himself, Matila Costiescu Ghyka must have had some. Much of Matila's inheritance came from another Moldavian aristocratic family (Balș), whose properties had been passed to his grandmother, Ecaterina Balș and then to Matila's uncle, Leon Ghika-Dumbrăveni. In his turn, Leon Ghika-Dumbrăveni, also known as Leon the Magnificent, was only half-brother to Matila's mother (Sturdza, *Familia Balș* 251-327). Faced with Matila's newly-acquired princely title, this branch of the Ghika family ("Ghika-Dumbrăveni") stood on a debatable genealogy, which made historians consider it as an impure extension. But the young prince always felt himself magnetized by Uncle Leo's personality, whose eccentric habits of life and passions for art, electricity, and science in general are mentioned several times by the memorialists of that period and must be considered – in every respect – formative for Matila's intellectual's profile (Callimachi, *Lumea toată era a mea* 31; Ghyka, *Curcubeie* 36, 75-77, 133, 148).

Thrilling as they might seem and as they really are, I will quit for now family intricacies and turn to the core question of this essay: What is the influence of le Bon's concept of *dematerialization* on Matila Ghyka's approach of his own life (lives)? Since individual traits and biography (as a meaningful story) would not do, I would like to follow the trail of an entity whose evolution resembles any material object's evolution: from *matter* to *dematerialization*. From a perspective calibrated on the life of Matter in general, *who* Matila Ghyka was is of lesser importance than *what* or *how* Matila Ghyka was. Only biography will not do.

## Textual matter and the concept of “dematerialization”

Matila Ghyka met, among other famous people, Gustave le Bon and Henri Poincaré, whose opinions are checked with respect to Hamilton’s principle of “minimum action”. A student in naval engineering, young Matila Ghyka is already fascinated by the physical-chemical systems that include Life (*Curcubeie* 126-27), more precisely by a mathematical definition of Life. Ghyka’s own notations concerning le Bon’s concept of dematerialization can be spotted in his memoirs, a work where his scientific interests are clearly stated. Hence, le Bon’s conceptual cluster *matter-ether-dematerialization* can be drawn closer to Matila Ghyka’s approach to writing “memories”, also formulated in the two volumes of memoirs, *Escales de ma jeunesse* (1955) and *Heureux qui, comme Ulysse...* (1956) – the latter’s title being inspired from Du Bellay’s sonnets. For the French readers, Ghyka’s memoirs bear an umbrella title (*Couleur du monde* – translated in Romanian as *Curcubeie* only in 2014), while for the English readers, the author picked another cultural reference (*The World Mine Oyster*). Published 5 years after the French version and 4 years before the author’s death, in 1961, the English edition should be considered a stylization of the previous texts; it is not only a translation and abbreviation of the original, but also the author’s proposal of bettering the original, of making his point more transparent. Memories as (enclosed) object of memoirs and memorizing the writing process are both involved in Matila’s reflection on the functioning of *memoria*, which is located somewhere between “Matter” and “Ether”, between “ponderable” and “imponderable”, as one of “the intermediate worlds”. As in all cases, the memorialist is challenged to turn imponderable recollections into ponderable memory, thus to revert Ether into Matter, to spot the “vortices” where energy, life’s energy, condensates.

What strikes the most in Matila Ghyka’s works – both fiction and non-fiction – is his technique of extensive self-quotation. Usually the process of self-citation is not mere swaggering, but recollection, reformulation and reframing of the previous writing styles. In terms of quantities, the novel *Pluie d’étoiles* is mentioned in Matila Ghyka’s memoirs *Couleur du monde* around 15 times (which is quite a lot). I could also identify 8 instances where extensive quotations travel from one text to the other, all of them counting approximately 10 pages from an amount of 450. The same is also valid for the theoretical works (*Esthétique des proportions dans la nature et dans les arts*, *Le nombre d’or. Rites et rythmes pythagoriciens dans le développement de la civilisation occidentale*, *Essai sur le rythme*, *Sortilèges du verbe*, etc.). Two

instances of self-quotation have drawn my attention in particular. In these cases, the author gives up quotation marks and cites the fragments from his own memory in the same fashion that, as a young mariner, used to declaim some Henri Regnier's, Pierre Loti's or Pierre Louÿs' prose fragments. These declaimed pieces detach themselves as poetic isles, as autonomous energetic discharges from the mass of the other recollections. They also indicate the actual materiality of the original experience that is recollected. The first is the material revelation of "Eve" at Kandy (*Curcubeie* 274-77) while the second is a dream about the dematerializing force of love (260).

These undeniable relationships among fictions (*Pluie d'étoiles*), memoirs (*Couleur du monde*) and philosophical works do not evince something that may be called, with a term borrowed from thermodynamics, a "system of communicating vessels". In this case, thermodynamics – providing the 19<sup>th</sup> century thought with a nice metaphor of fair exchange and complete burnout – is not a solution anymore. Its rigid principles – which are overruled by Matila Ghyka's approaches to systems containing life – assert that an isolated material system cannot possess other form of energy than that supplied from without, that is, from outside. Contrary to the metaphor of thermodynamic exchange, Matila's technique of *serial co-referencing* represents a way of pointing at a secret "lineage" of solid experiences and forms that have been liquefied, through the mediating actions of memory and writing, to a transparent meaning, to what Matila calls "the invariant".

Matila Ghyka believed that the creative principle should not be sought outside but within (*Estetica și teoria artei* 226-31). Underneath all natural things lies not only a source of energy (Soul, Life), but an energy endowed with a rhythm and able to function according to a rhythm, which stays imprinted in the form of all created things. This is, in fact, the meaning of Ghyka's chasing after the secret *Rakon* (the Japanese kanji for happiness 幸) imprinted on the porcelain sake cups he used to negotiate with the Japanese sellers of Kyoto and with the antiquarians on Judd Street. This is the aim of Ghyka's development of a theory inspired by the Golden Ratio ( $\Phi$ ). Hence, creation is understood as a rhythmic energy freed in the process of matter dissociation/disintegration. In the particular case of his written life episodes, the degree of dissociation or crystallization of textual matter indicates the actual materiality of the reported experience. Textual repetitions and series are not meant to enforce a transcendent original meaning (be that noted with either 幸 or  $\Phi$ ) but to dissolve it in a rhythmic line. They do not configure a system of exchanges between an outer source of energy –

say, for instance, the Romantics' divine inspiration – and (textual) matter. Matila's textual series refer here, assuming Gustave Le Bon's approach, to a process of *dematerialization*, which is meant to drive to transparency. Announcing the equivalence mass-force as well as what has been called The Atomic Age, the concept of “dematerialization” is also crucial for understanding Matila Ghyka's ideas on rhythm, on “the golden ratio”, on “the invariants” of Beauty, Life, and World in general as virtual keys of piercing through the opaque surface of matter. In spite of apparent opacity, says Ghyka, even the material substance of our bodies can show a “subtle”, “gassy” and “transparent” nature due to a numeric inner organization (*Estetica și teoria artei* 231). Seeking for the essential numbers/ratios has for Matila Ghyka an even higher purpose than reaffirming Pythagoras' idea that things are only worldly appearances of Numbers: departing from Pythagoras, the Romanian philosopher is actually contemplating ways of making matter transparent.

The memoirs, which come the last in the line of Ghyka's writings, endorse, appropriate and embed fragments from earlier narratives: the collection of short stories *Contes marécageux*, written around 1900, and left unpublished (*Curcubeie* 17-18) and the novel *Pluie d'étoiles* (1933), which is awarded, ironically, with the prize “Rester jeunes” in 1934, when Matila was turning fifty. Ghyka's own comments to his previous works suggest that textual avatars – from the unpublished short stories to the French bestseller – should point at *an evolution*. An evolution from what Matila calls “irony and stylistic incompleteness” to a state of achievement. But is Matila's achievement a formal, aesthetic one? Is Matila's achievement a sense of integrality, embodied in the Renaissance *uomo universale*? Is Matila's achievement the final dematerialization of textual matter, a way of making meaning transparent for all readers in spite of his obvious discreteness?

*The idea of evolution* is, if we refer back to Le Bon's theories, rather complex as it does not refer only to organic life (that is, in Darwin's terms, to the evolution of species), but also to non-organic realities, chiefly to Matter. “The law of evolution” – says Le Bon – “which is applicable to living species is also applicable to simple bodies; chemical species are no more invariable than are the living species” (Le Bon, *The Evolution of Matter* 9). Discovering that not only the radioactive substances, but all objects are in fact able to emanate effluvia of energy (the so-called “black light”), the French polymath considers that creation and destruction, Matter and Force should not be dissociated.

Matter, hitherto deemed indestructible, vanishes slowly by the continuous dissociation of its component atoms. The products of the dematerialization of matter constitute substances placed by their properties between ponderable bodies and imponderable Ether – that is to say, between two worlds hitherto considered as widely separate. Matter, formerly regarded as inert and only able to give back the energy originally supplied to it, is, on the other hand, a colossal reservoir of energy – intra-atomic energy – which it can expend without borrowing anything from without. It is from the intra-atomic energy manifested during the dissociation of matter that most of the forces in the universe are derived, and notably electricity and solar heat. Force and matter are two different form of one and the same thing. Matter represents a stable form of intra-atomic energy; heat, light, electricity etc. represent instable forms of it. By the dissociation of atoms – that is to say, by the dematerialization of matter, the stable form of energy termed “matter” is simply changed into those unstable forms known by the names of electricity, light, heat, etc. (*Ibid.*)

Matter – Le Bon continues – is a stable form of energy and nothing else, thus Nature and Energy should not be considered two irreducible things (12). Consequently, Nature is moved on only by and through itself. All (natural) phenomena represent in fact re-arrangements of equilibria (11), which occur slower (in which case we name them “matter”) or faster (in which case we name them electricity, heat, light and suchlike). Beside matter and energy, le Bon’s theory of dematerialization also integrates the concept of “Ether”, which would inspire Matila Ghyka in his considerations on transparency. Between the world of ponderable and the world of the imponderable – proves the French thinker – there is an “intermediate world” formed of “intermediate realities” (80-86). Ether condenses into matter through “vortices” that should be imagined as cosmic nebulae. The other way round, matter dissociates into intermediate states and then it vanishes into Ether.

What are the aesthetic and philosophic consequences of such anti-metaphysical vision? First of all, by accepting that “chemical” life evolves like organic species according to the law of evolution, one admits – this time with positive proofs – that the Universe is not the emanation of an almighty Creator, and that phenomena (one’s life circumstances, in particular) can be integrated to a coherent plan, which is not pre-defined in the fashion of the Greeks’ belief in Fate, but in accordance to an asymmetric pulsation of growth. Though *L’évolution de la matière* was one of the philosopher’s most unlucky books, Matila Ghyka seemed to have taken Gustave Le Bon’s

theory for granted, chiefly when he resolved to jot down his manifold lives, talents and careers (*Curcubeie* 116; *Estetica și teoria artei* 229).

In this frame of thought, the serialization of experiences – thus the life-style of a tireless traveler – should have sounded for Matila Ghyka as a good method of showing his readers an illustration of the liar’s paradox. Briefly put, the memorialist’s life is a story about becoming transparent. Accordingly, working with recollections is, as the memorialist himself admits, somehow similar to John Stuart Mill’s notes on consciousness:

If, therefore, we speak of the Mind as a series of feelings, we are obliged to complete the statement by calling it a series of feelings which is aware of itself as past and future; and we are reduced to the alternative of believing that the Mind, or Ego, is something different from any series of feelings, or possibilities of them, or of accepting the paradox, that something which ex hypothesis is but a series of feelings, can be aware of itself as a series. (*An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy* 213-14)

In a nutshell, when consciousness acknowledges its condition of “thread”, of mere series, it also acknowledges the fact that it does not exist. Analogically, appending a continuous meaning to one’s life (as biography) means to acknowledge that the life has not been lived at all.

### **Drawing close to transparency: Matila’s way stations and Matila’s lives**

Returning to Ghyka’s introductory remarks, I will just point out that, completely outstanding for a memorialist, Matila Ghyka’s main drive is to push back confessions, testimonies, and dramatic disclosures of his acquaintances’ lives. Obviously, in the vein of Renaissance treatises, *discreetness* and *prudence* represent qualities that fully recommended him as one of the most talented diplomats of Romania’s diplomatic corps during the 30’ and 40’. However, this scarcity of intimate details is not determined here by Ghyka’s fear of gossipy and colorful discoursing on his adventurous life. As a matter of fact, his main point in writing these memoirs is drawing a serial line of “careers”, of virtual ways of being himself and somebody else at the same time (*Curcubeie* 18).

Subsequently, his chase for the kanji of Happiness should not be correlated with a remote ideal of self-completeness, according to the aforementioned Renaissance paradigm. I am sure that Matila Ghyka abhorred all types of “concreteness” and that he did not look for a

personality design based on the complementarity of talents and on their full actualization. On the contrary, the traveler's incessant search for quintessential signs is a proof of him putting *matter* and *transparency* in the center of his reflections. The series of life-experiences and the series of readings incited by Ghyka's novel *Pluie d'étoiles* may prove to be a way to dematerialize both the living body (the individual, the "who", the "I") as well as the body of the book (the book as an object). It is not by chance then that the memorialist postulates the existence of four selves, which, like cinema or dreams, can build up a better illusion of multi-dimensional, ponderable reality (*Ibid.* 258). Note that Ghyka's actual perspective – a detail that is discretely pointed at in *Couleur du monde* – is more nuanced than Proust's famous distinction on the two "selves". In spite of their common friends among the European aristocratic families and despite him being talked into Proust's prose (*Ibid.* 257), Ghyka's sympathy for the French novelist occurred only very late.

A citizen of a Moldavian Byzantium, a pupil of the French boarding schools (St. Anne and Jersey), an aspirant in the French Navy, a naval officer and engineer in Romanian Navy, an interwar diplomat, a professor of aesthetic in the USA, a French novelist and philosopher, a casual actor with walk-on parts in Hollywood distributions, a manual worker in the American factories, a passionate antiquarian, a handsome mondain and – it goes without saying – many-many other *personae*, Matilia Ghyka seems always ready to embark for a new adventure and to escape the old selves. Together with the diplomats Georges Bibescu and George Stoicescu, he represents Romania in Persia. The lands from Baku to Batumi become a good pretext for imagining the routes of Golden Fleece seekers. Japan and its gods inspire him with musings of happiness. Even though still a land of promise, California offers both diaphanous reveries (the Golden Gate of San Francisco) and beastly views (the scenes of human and animal intercourse on the Barbary Coast).

But beyond all places visited and "lives" lived, London leaves the most powerful impression because this city is organized, says the Romanian prince, "according to the elastic and precise discipline of a battleship" (*Ibid.* 187). It is not because of its locating force that London will obsess him all along his life. In many ways, London becomes the carrier of quasi-ponderable dreams and of dreamy experiences, mentioned several times not only in his memoirs but also in *Pluie d'étoiles*. It is not its idealized image, but its containing, architectural, and therefore mathematic features that

makes London the vessel of all dreams. In spite of the city's geographical concreteness, London seems to be able to move like a ship, between ponderable and imponderable worlds, from one place to another. All in all, London leaves the impression of a city caught in the mysterious dance of Matter and Ether.

Much as I want to comment the contents of Matila's London dreams, I have to dwell here only on their serial occurrence and on their perplexing, almost 3D-materiality, also stressed by the memorialist himself. Indeed, the memorialist's and the novelist's dreams seem more vivid than his life's episodes. Quite frequently, Matila used to have a dream about him looking for the place of an antiquarian on Judd Street. After he moved to London, the dream eventually proved to be a vision. The man and his shop really existed but the actual experience is not as intense as the dreamer expected. In the same fashion as his memories collected in *Couleur du monde*, Matila's dreams are bits of experience on the brink between material and immaterial worlds. Some other proofs of his interest in the issue of dematerialization can be gathered from the memoirs fragments reporting dreams inspired by cinema experiences or narrating cinema experiences as such. Matila interprets the energy of movie figures (tigers, for instance) as dematerialized mass. Cinematic conversion – from mass to ether/ transparency – also illustrates the process of dematerialization. Wherefrom the aesthetician's interest for practicing and understanding this art' making at Hollywood (*Ibid.* 238-239, 257-258, 260, 274-276).

Since this research represents only a small part of a wider project devoted to *nostalgia*, conclusions cannot but harden into Matter what has been so far only a subject for reverie. While dematerialization is proved to be the way of all worldly things, passing from matter to ether and reconverting ether into matter are processes that describe with accuracy the strange sickness discovered by the physician Johannes Hofer de Mulhouse in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Nostalgia, the testimonies notice, manifests as a neurotic concentration on the material and the bodily, as a "continuous quasi-ecstasy of the mind" that is unable to represent anything except the body, albeit through the painful and unfulfilling mediation of imagination (Davies, *Sustainable Nostalgia* 264). Nostalgia is thus an unstable balance between matter and ether, actual experience and (written) recollection, a malady emerging from the process of dematerialization.

"Happy" or, better said, "nostalgic" like Ulysses from Du Bellay's sonnet, Ghyka wrote his memoirs in an aristocratic mansion, which he compared

with the Emerald Island. It is not the first time when the migrant writer recalls the archetypal image of serene happiness. In fact, the privileged place where the happy ones assemble is mentioned several times: when he narrates his chase after Rakon, Chojiro's golden seal of happiness (*Curcubeie* 90, 233) all the way through the Japanese islands, when he comments Böcklin's painting *Isle of the Dead* (108), and when he describes the Golden Gate of San Francisco (223). In all three situations, the air is characterized as "transparent", which is extremely close to le Bon's categories of "imponderable" and "etheric" or, if we appeal again to metaphors inspired from physics, to Kelvin's "elastic solid filling all the space".

To dissipate the body of the book through serial co-referencing means to discharge all its potential infra-energy. In this scenario concerning the evolution of matter, the book reaches the peak of its energy when it manages "to dissociate", to dissolve into multiple readings, to turn into mere ether. What disquieting prophecy on the fate of books, on the fate of masterpieces in general, on the suppressed rumor of lost things! A prophecy that Matila's posthumous readership has fulfilled completely by losing his person from sight for a half of a century.

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