

Sociological Reflections Re-Reading the Literary Character of Tarzan

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ABSTRACT

Literary narratives increasingly enrich sociological reflections by amplifying their intuitive scope. Literature becomes a new source for the sociologist, a sort of drawer of useful information that leads him to the re-articulation of a discourse, a reflection, a study. In this work the Author will refer to Burroughs and his work *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914). Tarzan is a classic character of literature that, starting from the concept of diversity and wonder of nature, co-constructs together with sociological knowledge the new thought of social justice and sustainability; it raises questions on the true meaning of civilization, racism, perception and acceptance of the other, the man-nature partition and, suddenly, an invented character indicates a different way to rearticulate a theme and becomes a source of knowledge. In this work, the data, the story, are not manipulated, but the data and the story are used to strengthen specific forms of sociological argumentation, so, I can say, that the narration becomes sociologically relevant.

Keywords: literature, diversity, man-nature partition, wonder

INTRODUCTION

Literature becomes a new source for the sociologist, a sort of drawer of useful information that leads him to the re-articulation of a discourse, a reflection, a

study. In the literary narratives we encounter, as Turnatori (2003) writes, «the reinterpreted scientific knowledge» and we realize how it «becomes common sense and participates in social and cultural processes». Literary imagination becomes necessary for the sociological one. Burroughs and his work *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914) becomes for the sociologist a new way of reflecting on the diversity and the wonder, of man and of the natural world, and on the processes and dynamics of interaction, acceptance or non-acceptance and empathy between the two systems. The diversity and wonder of nature, that are read starting from the character of Tarzan, present themselves as complexities capable of stimulating forms of interdisciplinary dialogue. A space that creates encounters/comparisons between different angles of analysis and that brings out the cognitive value of “new” sources. The two categories question culture, politics, science of rights, equality, acceptance and discrimination. They exalt the culture of (ethnic) identity and the (ancestral) sense of (inter) connection that moves within the flows of reality and relationships. The sociologist places at the center of their research path not only more theoretical frameworks that support an in-depth analysis integrated with psychological, anthropological, legal and historical contributions, but the reading of phenomena through literary contributions seems to be increasingly affirmed. Literature gives the

sociologist a social sense that they would not find elsewhere and facilitates a dialogue, even if chaotic, that leads to the re-elaboration of a new thought.

The following work is a sociological reflection on the strength of the analysis that derives from the overlap between Sociology (cultural, environmental) and literature. And it is precisely from this overlap that the critical sociological reflection that digs into the contents of literature going beyond the aesthetic and the communicative aspect, was born. Sociology has always been classified as a scientific institution, overshadowing the nature of the literary genre, and posing as authoritative scientific knowledge, but what we try to do in this little work is to deal with the concepts of reality, those of diversity and the wonder of nature, with an analytical approach that falls within a boundary that is not well defined by the review and logical analysis.

This is done in a totally new (and arbitrary) way in which we try to communicate to the community that a simple literary character, unreal, invented by the inspiration of a writer, can teach so much. That character can become a field of research from which it's possible to draw data that can prompt reflections and practices, not by chance Longo (2006) writes that «the multifaceted complexity of the social legitimizes the coexistence of a plurality of methods and techniques which the sociologist acquires from time to time to explain and understand specific aspects of reality that are supposed to be integrated. » Therefore, the Sociology of literature, the role of the story is inserted as a new method and new technique of investigation that helps the sociologist to penetrate, when analysing some concepts and phenomena, in a better way. In this work, the data, the story, are not manipulated, but the data and the story are used to strengthen specific forms of sociological argumentation, so, we can say, that thanks to Longo's reflection the narration becomes sociologically relevant.

In a period that is characterized more and more by complex issues, literature

contributes to clarify everyday reality in an innovative way, leading sociologists to question themselves and to decode the world with an unusual approach. Parini (2017) writes that literature for the sociologist «is a useful tool for dismantling social connections that are taken for granted and, at the same time, an invitation to find new ones, thus offering a fundamental contribution to the study of society. »

Diversity and wonder present themselves as complexity capable of stimulating forms of interdisciplinary dialogue. Where literary narration builds «stories as if they were true» the sociologist «has the honor of facts» (Turnaturi 2003:16). If diversity questions culture, politics, science of rights, equality, acceptance and discrimination, wonder, instead, moves reflections onto the power of emotions, knowledge, and human experience. Diversity emphasises the culture of (ethnic) identity that stirs within the flows of reality and relationships, it is, in other words, a complexity that overcomes disciplinary margins and refers to old and new declinations both in the social and in the hard sciences. Wonder alludes to something extraordinary that fascinates, about a surprise and about an unusual experience. A sort of unknown that goes through the meanders of curiosity and contemplation and settles within the memory.

Identity (Ethnic), pluralism, migration, resilience, but also environment and nature, experience and memory put the question of alterity and astonishment closer to the analysis of diversity and wonder, but literary experience allows us to read these two dimensions from another point of view and to search for new dimensions, in this new space, which allow us to sort out the present in a better way. Literature becomes a source of inspiration and of further collection of information.

It offers, as Eco (1994) writes, «that capability [...] to perceive the world and reconstruct the past. » He invites us to read the world as if it were a novel. Through the metaphor of the narrative forest, he

indicates a space within which to build knowledge, a process of interpretation.

In this work, it is Burroughs' work that takes us by the hand into an original story and allows us to discover a reading system that, even if it is a full expression of the cultural and historical era in which the writer creates the boy raised among the apes and helps us to understand its modern nuances. Tarzan's story co-constructs, along with sociological (scientific) knowledge, the new thought of social justice and sustainability: a sustainable and renewable mental model in which the implementation of an educational transition, that recovers the traditional knowledge and the emotional and spiritual bond with nature, is determined as a priority.

Burroughs' work provides that invitation that Parini (2017) referred to, of going through a drawer and confronting uncomfortable aspects that sometimes show the precariousness of usual patterns. It produces «a buzz that accompanies those who persist in looking at the world with curiosity» (ibid.) and that gives vitality to the research.

THE DIVERSITY THAT TARZAN TEACHES US

Modern and complex societies increasingly measure themselves with the unfair emptying of feelings and emotions, making them dissatisfied and slowly devoured by individual freedoms. The relational system (man-man and man-nature) is increasingly characterized by the economic concept of cost-opportunity: the value of the best available alternative presupposes renunciation. Man seems to have renounced the value of (inter)connection as an element of conjunction between the different dimensions of the universe (man, animals, plants, minerals) to preserve the individual and egoistic self-preservation full of benefits (social, economic) and subjugation. Modern man struggles to recognize and compare himself to the ethno-ecological concept of traditional knowledge as a sacred path towards truth and human re-education

to get to know himself better along with his relationships with others and the natural world.

He has renounced the sacredness of nature and the porosity of human borders to self-celebrate his glorious telluric strength and his predominance over the natural world along with his fellow man. In this arrogant march towards an increasingly difficult future, man advances inexorably without looking back. In this path marked by the need for transition as a means to mitigate his meaningful passage, it is increasingly clear that a specific transition is urgently needed: that of mentality.

We need to activate a process aimed at an educational transition built on the construction of an architecture of thought, on research directions capable of facing the daily challenges of communities, on the formulation of an emerging thought driven by stress-events that allow us to develop a new mental model in order to understand what is happening outside.

Literature seems to help us in the process of producing a new-knowledge seen as a new framework of interdisciplinary knowledge and in this work the reflective cue that is capable of contributing to the development of a new mental model (sustainable and renewable) and of a new level of knowledge, comes from the character of Tarzan. Burroughs' character in this work is presented as an analysis tool of two elements on which the new mental model should be developed: diversity and wonder, two elements that must be read and analyzed in the context of the interconnection on which the philosophical thought of indigenous peoples is based. The concept of connection is strongly linked to reciprocity, but also to loss.

Losing the connection with the origin of life and with the spiritual dimension is equivalent to losing one's humanity and sense of identity.

Tarzan allows us to retrace the loss and reconquest of the lost and to reread the diversity and sense of wonder of nature in a

modern way. A banal story becomes sociological truth (Dal Lago 1987).

In particular, Tarzan is a literary character who presents us with an uncomfortable but important reading of the diversity and wonder of a yesterday that seems to belong to a past that is too far characterized by linguistic canons, stereotypes, social representations, scientific theories purely from the early twentieth century, but always current. He helps us understand how the loss of connection can be filled and what the limits and potential of the entire process are.

Who is Tarzan?

Tarzan is presented in his most natural features, without any pretension. We have been presented with his strong capacity for resistance and adaptation. Tarzan, who, despite the misfortune of being an orphan lost in the jungle, had the privilege of living in harmony with nature, of understanding its rhythms and cycles, of preserving life and dispensing death for his own (or his group's) survival and protection. Without too many frills or noble labels, Tarzan presents himself, in his most absolute primitiveness, as a true king of the jungle gifted with strength, intelligence and beauty. A sylvan god as Jane calls him.

But Tarzan is much more than this. Tarzan is a powerful and multilayered character who converges the entire narrative line onto himself; he is a hero and a man who soon shows the limits, or excesses, of his being white. He, in addition to resilience, shows us the ambivalence of diversity, of the relationship with alterity (other and natural world).

Alterity is read according to Ardigò's (1997) micro and macro relational concept, according to which it can be said that in the jungle Tarzan acts and reacts in the context of micro relationships (group) and in the macro ones in which he immerses into the city, into the classist, capitalist culture of the whites.

This is why the concept of diversity that Tarzan leaves us as a legacy must be read by taking the moments in which he

understands it through experience into account. He experiments with the dimensions of diversity in a space and time that mark a before and after in which Tarzan finds out that he is other, and he does so by experiencing rejection, pain and the construction of a sense of trust.

If Eco creates the metaphor of the forest, Burroughs improperly creates, that of the jungle and outlines the boundaries of the narrative and highlights the problematic nodes in which the configurations of diversity are built. Metaphorically Tarzan is the colonial hegemony that faces itself. His story, in fact, is a story that is rooted within colonialism, in the forced encounter between two different cultures, an encounter in which subordination puts one and the other in an unequal relationship.

Initially he is crushed by subordination, he depends on Kala, his adoptive gorilla mother and on the rules of the pack, on the territory that imposes itself on his weakness and on the initial disadvantage compared to the gorillas. He is a man (unaware) among a group of animals. Kala gives a name to that diversity by calling it white skin and takes care of him as if he were her own son. Despite the love of the gorilla mother he is mocked, treated as someone different to be excluded from the tribe.

When, however, he is able to truly understand the difference between himself and the others, the diversity, which initially relegates him to the margins of that life, he overpowers the animal group, the physical difference prevails, intelligence prevails, a type of adaptation that leads him to excel compared to his gorilla brothers. He is described as a very intelligent boy, able to learn to write and read from a spelling book, but not to speak. He proves to be much more intuitive, much more active from a cognitive point of view, to such an extent that Tarzan manages to become the king of the jungle. After all, Burroughs describes him as a white man: full expression of the superior race. But Tarzan doesn't just know the jungle and animals, he has had the opportunity to meet humans, and he hates

them deeply, because those who killed Kala, the only mother he ever had, were humans. But this very moment allows us to reflect upon the author's, intentional or non-intentional, white vision which he has impressed upon Tarzan. The worldview of the dominant culture, imbued with tones of superiority and capitalist power. Black African characters are defined in a discriminatory way by the white vision as «poor black devils» (Burroughs 1914:147) «miserable blacks» (ivi:6). Tarzan, unknowingly, acts in the shadows of racism, he feels no feeling of brotherhood towards them, they are enemies just like the animals could be, but he does not hesitate to help the whites that he meets in the jungle. And it is precisely here that Tarzan becomes an imperfect hero. He presents himself to the Africans as a «manifestation of evil power» (ivi:63) a veil falls on his connection with nature, on his spirit made from the spirits of animals.

The idea of death and life has a special meaning for Tarzan. To live, one must necessarily kill in the jungle, otherwise he is killed. He has no mercy for the animal he must kill, he feels no remorse because it is the law of nature and he is part of it, and he feels no remorse when he kills the black boy who kills his mother Kala as a rite of passage. He has an idea of life and death that is outside the boundaries of honor.

But Tarzan is a (white) man, and the more he grows, the more humanity strengthens in him. He perceives to be distant from his gorilla brothers, the impossibility of sharing intellectual property with them makes him experience the despair of diversity once again. He feels like an island where his individualism and the idea of domination prevail and the possibility of multiplicity as a paradigm of a welcoming society slips away from him. Now he is alone, Kala is dead and his playmates have become «big, gruff and ferocious gorillas» (ivi:69). The sense of loneliness stirs within him.

Tarzan has always been a man, but he discovers that he is totally a man when he meets and falls in love with Jane. He adored

her and contemplated her as a creature that was born to be protected, and he was the man who was born to protect her. This visceral instinct of protection will lead him to kill again. Tarzan, overwhelmed by his feelings for Jane, is aware of being a man who wants to be a man because he wants to be the object of Jane's affection and for this reason, he abandons his tribe, leaving it to discord and disorder. In the first book in which the writer narrates about Tarzan, the love story between Tarzan and Jane is a brief parenthesis in Tarzan's life because Jane, despite having feelings for that man-god, chooses to marry someone else. Tarzan, despite discovering that he is a noble man and that he belongs to the superior race of the privileged in a world of whites, returns to experience diversity.

For the white Western society he remains a son of Africa and experiences the non-acceptance of diversity on himself. He is aware of his inappropriateness for a woman like Jane and does nothing but think about going back to where he came from. His actions are no longer limited to the environment of the jungle, he is no longer in the micro dimension, he moves towards the macro of the civil society. The reversal of perspective sacrifices the details of the micro-narration and places Tarzan as different among his peers.

At this point the multi-layered character tries to get rid of his primitiveness to return to reclaim a civilization that was taken away from him, and in this long journey, the process of civilization takes him away from the relationship of sacredness with the environment and the gorilla community in which he grew up. Civilization is once again an element of expression of white supremacy. Tarzan is a white man and that state of primitive savagery is not appropriate for a representative of the superior race. But the more he moves away from the jungle, from nature, the more he realizes that civilization is a high and maximum form of anthropocentrism, colonialism and capitalism that subjugates nature without taking care of it. Civil society becomes a

space of awareness and reappropriation of responsibility for the future.

After having tasted the bitterness of failed integration and having experienced the breaking of a love, he rediscovers his wild heart and regains his own primitiveness and that lost relationship with the natural world that he had spontaneously renounced. Man has returned to being a spirit of the jungle. His identity lies within his authentic experience and, having distanced himself from the liquidity of the white society, he returns to the bonds of the jungle.

THE WONDER OF TARZAN'S LOST AND FOUND NATURE

Tarzan of the Apes also allows us to rediscover the wonder of nature, as Pieroni (2010) hoped for in one of his last writings. This wonder is adorned with a finer and deeper (ecological) awareness according to which «nature becomes a new object of contemplation» (ivi:132).

Pieroni reinforces the action of contemplation by counting on the sense of loss and disappointment and using Heidegger's (1927) statement «we notice things when they vanish, fall into ruin, begin to behave strangely or in some way disappoint you». Tarzan brings the pain of detachment (from nature), of emptiness and solitude to the reader in order to reach the activation of a consciousness and knowledge (ecological-spiritual) that elevates the lost.

It is as if the literary character anticipated the anthropocene meaning of detachment from nature, the extreme representation of capitalist logic, or of what Moore (2017) calls the ideological attitude of the bourgeoisie that devalues nature from a cultural and ethical point of view. Nature becomes cheap, of little value, and is separated from the human system; it is emptied of its sacred meaning and filled with the need for progress. Tarzan, despite being the unaware son of colonialism and capitalism, becomes a hero and promoter of reciprocity between nature and man. He feeds on the lifeblood of nature and by

choosing to defend it, to return to it, he establishes the need for a re-education that builds a new ecological mentality. Through wonder, Tarzan promotes an educational process that leads to the architecture of a new emerging thought that, if approached with empathy, could help to understand what is happening outside oneself in a better way.

Tarzan evokes the memory of Rousseau's noble savage (1755, 1762), in many scholars, inevitably corrupted, later, by society and the process of civilization. Tarzan the noble savage presents himself with a humanity that is totally free from the idea of civilization, a man of nature empathetically projected to recognize the sacredness of the connections between living beings. Tarzan's naturalness makes him free, healthy, good and happy (ibid.) and elevates him to a sort of spirit of nature that is respected and feared. Tarzan, still unaware of his humanity, is privileged in the jungle because his human physical and cognitive abilities make him a winning animal. Burroughs sometimes presents him as a beast that is capable of wickedness and brute force, even if the jungle requires it, even if survival requires it. A beast that emerges from the African lushness almost as a magical figure that lives off a unique connection with the animals and fights with some of them, killing them. Tarzan has a sort of «power over the animals of the jungle, because his spirit came from them. He understood them. And he learned to be one whole with them.»¹ Learning and self-education give Tarzan the impetus towards humanity and instill the seed of inequality in him.

The noble savage becomes a civilized man and moves away from nature, from its rhythms, from its wonder. The more he becomes a non-natural man, the more the memory of the real and wild Africa echoes within his actions. Men become social animals that are more brutal than gorillas,

¹ Quote from the movie *The Legend of Tarzan* (2016) directed by David Yates

the city becomes a mirror in which the memory and the melancholy for the jungle are reflected.

The city has tamed the beast within Tarzan, but has exalted his exquisitely human qualities, daughters of progress. Tarzan's transformation shifts from the wild home to the light of knowledge. The loss of the sounds and the vitality of the jungle are for Tarzan a disharmonious and shrill noise that lead him back to the search for nature once again because he is nature.

In the capitalist space Tarzan clashes with two elements that fuel the logic of appropriation and accumulation: the breaking and going beyond the limits. The first term refers to the broken bond between nature and the human being, to a process that erases the roots of memory, that cancels the traditional knowledge through which man lives and connects to the environment, to that set of beliefs and values that determine the ethnoecological praxis and the second to anthropocentrism, to the will to consider nature as a separate entity, as a basket of resources to be introduced into the capitalist production machine of progress. The spot beyond the limits is the point of no return, it is the presence in the geological and cultural layers of the human impact. It is the determination of domination and of use and abuse.

The sense of loss and being aware of going beyond the limits are the reflection that is distorted by the pieces of broken glass of reality.

That's when Tarzan, realizing all this, reconquers the lost and returns to the ancient bond with the earth. Nature becomes wonder once again. The wonder that adorns Tarzan is a reaffirmation of place: place attachment, place identity.² Nature, the

jungle and its laws express, for Tarzan, the functions of recognition, meaning and expression (See Proshansky 1983) that define his identity and that stimulate his emotional bond. The bond is a form of feelings and memories and Tarzan defines his self through the place.

In other words, Tarzan's identity is specified as «the set of beliefs, interests, attitudes and evaluations through which the individual defines himself along with values, emotions and behaviors that are related to him» (Migliorini and Venini 2001).

The change in Tarzan's emotions leans on the transformation of the place (change of place): the passage from the jungle to the city evokes, in him, Heidegger's sense of being lost.

The son of Africa becomes a man of the city and struggles to find those lines loaded with magic and memories of his jungle on the streets and among the buildings. Change threatens his consolidated behavior patterns with which he has always felt comfortable and it is only thanks to his emotional resilience that Tarzan regains what was lost. For sociologists the rediscovered wonder of nature is the paradigm of contemplation: looking at nature with emotions, tapping into the secrets of the world and drawing a fair and sustainable benefit that refers to the ancestral ethno-ecological model kcp (kosmos, corpus, praxis): the system of beliefs and knowledge (ecological knowledge) that allows sustainable practices and pro-environmental behaviors.

Tarzan becomes data and instrument of the educational transition (sustainable and renewable) that stimulates the return to traditional knowledge, which invokes the acceptance of Mitakuyeability (Senatore and Groe 2022) that is the ability to reconnect with oneself, others and the natural world to redefine sustainability, to regain and recover what was lost.

Tarzan is a single point imprinted onto the great circle of life, according to the vision of

those fixed points that no longer make it recognizable.

² By using environmental psychology, we can say that the place is a home, a place of learning and memory. It is a cognitive-emotional connection with a space that is the image of oneself and of the values associated with it. It is a point of reference and steadiness. It is identity and certainty. When the place changes and/or transforms, it becomes disorienting. The transformation of the place or of the look with which one has to do with it, shakes

the Lakota, placed in relation and connection with the other possibilities of the universe. There is no anthropocentric centrality, there is no predominance, but reciprocity and sustainable practice. Tarzan is the white-skinned ape that recalls the magical and spiritual relationship with nature reminding us that we are all nature.

CONCLUSION

From the encounter with literary narrative (of Tarzan) the sociologist draws material that he introduces into his research path, «material to nourish life, and awareness of life.» (Affuso 2017).

Tarzan becomes an unaware bearer of diversity and wonder (of nature) as a magnifying glass of an ambivalent perspective.

The character explains alterity by becoming the home of identity and shows how the loss of the sense of wonder of the natural world activates discomfort and a deficit of nature that makes one lonely and disconnected.

Diversity in Burroughs' novel initially seems to devour Tarzan's identity, it becomes anguish and obstacle and nullifies him as a man, instead, it exalts his primitive aspect and inferiority compared to the group of apes in which he lives, then it becomes revelation and awareness and Tarzan regains a liberating and self-determining identity.

Diversity becomes surprise thanks to his encounter with Jane, the communicative openness frees the identity that is gripped by the diversity of the jungle, Tarzan is aware of being a man who wants to live like a man.

He recognizes elements of sharing and roots in his fellow man.

Jane is a sort of whitewashing of society, not only she proclaims the superiority of the white man, but also goodness, strength and power and Tarzan recognizes its familiarity. Diversity from torment becomes wonder, a fragile wonder that will soon show Tarzan the inevitability of human weakness. The ethical, emotional and cultural violence of civilization are like a crystal glass that is no

longer perfect, but full of cracks and chips that cast deformed shadows.

If the encounter with Jane frees his identity as a white man, the encounter with the civil society prompts him to return to his true origins: the jungle. He is a white man among the whites, even though he is different.

But the reappropriation of human reason, of the light of knowledge, push Tarzan away from the sacredness of nature so he stops being a noble savage and becomes a man (of the white race) with his weaknesses and fragility. The civilized world lacking African familiarities push Tarzan to clash with the discomfort of loss (of nature). Modernity echoes in his new found identity, but the man he was is stamping in him and the men of society are not the animals of the jungle with which it is possible to live and survive. It is no longer necessary to look an elephant in the eye and talk to him in silence, with men there is a different relational system that imposes rules and psychological dimensions that are not immediately comprehensible and implementable. Tarzan is a (melancholic) spectator of a (colonial) system that subjugates, violates and sacrifices nature. He observes progress and draws the sad awareness that is a cold machine for the transformation of nature, and he is part of that transformation. In cultural (and geological) stratifications, man leaves his trace of irrefutable proof of dominion over resources and natural laws, breaking ancient bonds. In this modern and young society, that has just begun to progress, Tarzan is a circus attraction for some, a curiosity to dwell on futilely, a domesticated animal stripped of its human component, while for others it's the true essence of nature to take just one look at but not for giving it complete attention. But Tarzan is resilience, especially emotional, and he recovers his love for the jungle and his emotional bond with his native home and returns to his place which redefines him as a new man and a hero.

Tarzan provides a series of elements with which today's complex societies can be read, in which migrations, wars and environmental crises show the most different and contrasting aspects of diversity, of the encounter with diversity, of the fear of diversity and of the loss of connection with nature.

Tarzan is a full expression of «being» and «becoming» (Groe,2024) by passing through an elsewhere. This means that the journey (physical, evolutionary) that takes him from the jungle to the city, from uncontaminated nature to transformed nature, from micro to macro, changes him. In fact, it makes him shift from a hero-being that is rooted within his place of identity to something else on which social labeling weighs. He becomes other, a deviant, because even though he is white, he embodies the wild and dangerous spirit of a context where civilization does not dwell. The elsewhere strips away his reassuring place and makes him experience the sense of loss and going beyond limits. Those porous borders on which he had based his survival become walls, ditches; that respect for natural cycles becomes a thirst for progress, dependence stones subsistence, cheap nature enriches the attitude of the bourgeoisie.

The detachment from his place of identity makes him lose himself within the meanders of a plot that he can only elaborate thanks to the resilient and healing nostalgia. This resilience provides Tarzan with the need for a new educational transition that is capable of elaborating and building a sustainable and renewable mental model based on and strengthened by the connection of ethno-ecological derivation and the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples. And he gives it to us.

Tarzan adapts to a modern reading of alterity and raises questions on the true meaning of civilization, of racism and of accepting the other, of the divided relationship between man and nature, and suddenly, an invented character indicates a

different route in order to rearticulate a theme and becomes a source of knowledge.

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