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Translation Of "Meaning" By D. Slamnig

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Recommended Citation

D. Slamnig and Sibelan E.S. Forrester , translator. (2010). "Translation Of "Meaning" By D. Slamnig". *World Literature Today*. Volume 84, Issue 3. 61-63.

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Meaning

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Source: *World Literature Today*, MAY/JUNE 2010, Vol. 84, No. 3 (MAY/JUNE 2010), pp. 61-63

Published by: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27871090>

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Meaning

Davor Slamnig

Davor Slamnig is a Croatian writer, musician, and composer. "Smisao" was first published in Krumpirova rodbina (The potato family) in 2005 and appears here for the first time in English. For more on Croatia's colorful SF scene, read Aleksandar Žiljak's survey in this month's issue of WLT online.

Seek meaning, or else reproduce—these were the only two options on the distant planet of Torte. The dominant life form was represented by intelligent cephalomorphic Torteons, and for millennia the Torteonic practical social philosophy had carried out two ancient directives:

(1) An adult Torteon was expected to contribute (as much as possible) to the general civilizational understanding of the meaning of life. Every original individual insight was entered into The Book.

(2) Reproduction was the task of those who were not capable of cognition—be it that they had never even tried, or that the springs of the spirit had dried up in them. Upon embarking on reproduction, the individual spent all his energy on the cultivation and education of the offspring. Thus he lost forever, both practically and formally, the right to participate in the collective cognitive process.

A child did not reach independence for at least the first thirty years. For the first seven years it had the form of a beaked larva that couldn't move at all, whose gaping opening expected pre-digested food nine times a day. It spent the next seven years in the tadpole stage, only to form a cocoon at fifteen. Then there followed two years of relative relaxation for the parents (the cocoon merely had to be moved from time to time so it wouldn't mildew). But in the seventeenth year a giddy butterfly-like creature emerged from the cocoon and, to its parents' horror, fluttered off through the world at great speed, exposing itself to unnecessary dangers (but still coming

home several times a week to raid the parental nutrimat). With singed wings, sometime after twenty-five, it would begin serious schooling and the quest for its own cognitive vocation, and then sometime after thirty it would finally stabilize into a socially responsible unit.

Young Emul, too, passed through all of this. Gradually grasping the state of things, he began to feel ashamed of his own parents who, by the very act of giving birth to him, had renounced cognition. For he was at liberty to sail the seas of existence, to discover the mystery, while his parents had condemned themselves to a kind of debilitating servitude.

Emul, gifted as he was, made it through all the schools with ease and excellence. After he had satisfied even the highest educational criteria, he began to write a dissertation with the working title *Circular Autocognition: Consciousness as the Consciousness of Consciousness*. At first the ideas announced themselves in a clear but short-lived flash; the process of exact formulation demanded a great deal more time. Emul realized that introspection, with his own consciousness as the sole experimental subject, would be only one of the many tools he would need to use. But how could he observe someone else's consciousness?

As his first experimental subjects, he took some electroluminescent dodecapods from the depths of the ocean. Proceeding from the hypothesis that the flickering illuminative phenomena within those translucent organisms reflected their conscious processes, he placed a mirror in their aquarium. Theoretically, the dodecapods would, as they looked at themselves in the mirror,

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perceive their own psyche. Thus they would be trapped in a perceptual-expressive positive feedback loop, culminating in the end in some kind of psychic singularity.

And indeed, the dodecapods would float over to the mirror and then somehow freeze—their behavior varied from a gentle undulation of the limbs to sudden convulsions. When the mirror was removed, the dodecapods did not manage to recover their psychic equilibrium. After short-lived, manic episodes they would all sink into catatonia and expire.

That fact, no matter how experimentally reproducible, did not help Emul's thesis much. He wanted to demonstrate that an increase of autocognition improved the quality of consciousness. The dodecapods, unfortunately, were losing their consciousness forever. And the replacement cost of a single specimen was around 1,200 Torteles. The costs of the project were growing; soon Emul would have to show some kind of results.

One night, in the basement of the Biopsych Institute, in the passage between the aquarium and the computer hall, he got acquainted with Felis.

Felis was occupied with her own project, which was an attempt to demonstrate that consciousness was a completely deterministic phenomenon. The basic thesis was that "free will" was in fact a myth, an unscientific product of Torteonic collective vanity, which could not be reconciled with the fact that an apparently "conscious" being neither decided, nor even knew, what it would be doing next. And, again, it would always react unambiguously to current circumstances.

The solution of that paradox lay in the fact that current conditions are always too complex to be precisely extrapolated into the future, at least not with the available resources. Theoretically, a computer that would be capable of this would have to possess a complexity equivalent to the whole universe (or greater).

Therefore, a conscious being is an automaton, but it can't grasp its own automatism.

She had an unappealing theory. His dodecapods were dying off. They had something in common. In the canteen, illuminated with flickering xenon lamps, they wearily told each other their stories. Through the windows they observed the dirty parking lot, as the first light of dawn slowly but implacably overpowered the streetlights. After a moment the streetlights gave up

and winked out. It was time to go. They walked out into the cold air.

His autobot was in the shop (the ionic converter was clogged). She offered to give him a ride to his compartment in her bot, but he told her he would prefer to walk.

In the beginning their association had a collegial and friendly character. Neither one suspected which way it was actually going. The first things they tried to connect were their theories, as a symbolic introduction to the deeper process of connection.

The average temperature of the tropical belt of Torte was around 4°C, and toward the poles it sank on a steep curve. Some organisms had adapted to a temperature below -150°C. Felis believed that under those conditions their neurons must occasionally be in a condition of superconductivity, or even in a quantum coherent condition, producing brief cognitive bursts of unbelievable power. The practical Emul got the idea for a microwave brain chiller, which could, theoretically, drastically increase cognitive (and autocognitive) capabilities.

Once again it had to do with the bright flash of an idea, formulated in the moments they spent together more and more often. In the beginning those were less and less accidental meetings in the institute canteen, but later joint expeditions out to the local gastroramas, enozonk bars, and digilepsothèques.

Be that as it may, the idea had to be formally explicated: they had to plow through an incalculable mountain of mathematics, physics, and biology. Moreover, they had to select new experimental examples and conceptualize the tests. Then the elaborated project had to be submitted to the Evaluation Office, and after that their attestation provided to Biopsych, which in the end would say amen to the proposed program, obtain specimens, and provide experimental conditions in the basement.

After six Torteonic months (around eighteen Earth ones), when they had already lost all hope, the papers came from Biopsych. Their project was approved, the financing guaranteed, and the first refrigerator with the subpolar sloths was en route.

Felis wasn't at the institute. Emul drove off to her residence and went in without knocking.

"Felis! The papers came!" he shouted from the entryway. He looked into the kitchen. She wasn't there. "Felis!"

Davor Slamnig (b. 1956, Zagreb) spent some time in the U.S. in his youth, getting hooked on folk songs and SF. He had a go at different musical instruments, ranging from ukulele to saxophone, before finally settling on the guitar. His first stories were published in Croatia in the 1980s, followed by four books (three story collections and a novel). Currently, he is writing mostly in C++.

Sibelan Forrester has published translations from Croatian, Russian, and Serbian, including Irena Vrkljan's *Svila*, *Škare* and a bilingual edition of Elena Ignatova's *ВОЗДУШНЫЙ КОЛОКОЛ* / *The Diving Bell*. In her day job, she is Professor of Russian Language and Literature at Swarthmore College.

She came out of the bedroom. Her eyes were red. She was wrapped in a thick dressing gown and trembling as if she were cold.

"Our project won," said Emul.

"I'm pregnant," said Felis.

He lost about a day after that. Only short flashes from the time remained in his memory: he broke up a Hazardola with an empty bottle of fukazi . . . the sun came out behind the sea . . . he fell on his head out of a taxibot onto the wet pavement . . . he woke up in the triage area of the traumatological clinic, yanked the IV needle out of his arm, got up from the stretcher and staggered toward the exit . . . he woke up again in her bed, but immediately sank back into sleep. . . .

They exchanged their two starter residences for a slightly larger protofamily compartment in a better neighborhood. After they had announced their entry into the reproductive process (as required by law), they were both automatically dishonorably dismissed from the institute, with a permanent ban on occupying themselves with pure cognition. But they didn't suffer financially. The ban didn't refer to working in the "applied sciences," that is, to commercial industrial projects and design. Emul promptly found a job in the private sector, as part of the development team in a company that produced household appliances. Using his previous experience, he started working on a lamp based on electroluminescent dodecapods. Since the lamp used organic compounds (food for the dodecapods) as an energy source, it wasn't dependent on the electrical grid. The management hoped that it could compete in the market with battery-powered flashlights. Besides that, the unbelievably efficient and flexible digestive system of the dodecapods made it possible to use all kinds of fuel—kitchen scraps, old clothes and shoes, and even excrement—which would add a significant ecological dimension to this type of lamp. Emul turned out to be a young development star.

Felis was getting bigger and bigger every day, toward the end almost before his eyes. One inevitable morning she shouted from the kitchen, "Emul! Emul!" He ran in naked from the bedroom and was in time just to put the large ellipsoid safely on a pillow on the living room floor.

She had laid the egg.

Neither she nor he had any faith in electric heaters with a thermostat. After all, this was their first egg. They took turns sitting on it. She would

take her seat early in the morning, and he would go off to work. Then he would run home during the lunch break to grab a bite and sit on the egg for half an hour, while she took care of essential physical needs and drank some coffee. During the afternoon they would alternate as necessary, but the night shift was his. He learned to sleep in a sitting position.

The shell had been growing thinner and softer for days. Its surface, hard until recently, rippled and bulged, revealing the wriggling of the ever more lively occupant who was getting cramped in there.

It was very late. Felis was already asleep, while Emul was trying to finish some calculations, although the symbols swam before his eyes. He felt a sharp blow in the most sensitive part of his groin, accompanied by a muffled crack, like when an autobot drives over a child's toroid. Between his legs he caught sight of a little beak-shaped snout poking out of the crack, and behind it two big violet eyes.

Felis didn't wake up, but she began to twitch, as if in some deep, strenuous dream. Emul bent over, freed the wet downy organism from the shell, lifted it in his arms, and took it over to the convector to dry it off. After a while the larva closed its eyes and began sucking its seventh finger. He put it in the bed beside its mother. Felis sighed, turned over, and hugged the brand-new little Torteon. . . .

A few sleepless days later, swallowing who knows what dose of forest fern-flavored "Predigestine" baby food, he finally took a moment to think things over. "Now it's all clear to me," he said.

"But the second ancient Torteonic directive forbids you to make your insight known," said Felis. "As soon as you reproduce, you automatically renounce the right to take part in the civilizational process."

"But why is it forbidden to write something in The Book if I know it now, but didn't know it before?"

"Because everyone knows it anyway," said Felis.

Emul threw up into the baby's gaping beak. □

Zagreb

Translated from the Croatian
By Sibelan Forrester

After they had announced their entry into the reproductive process (as required by law), they were both automatically dishonorably dismissed from the institute, with a permanent ban on occupying themselves with pure cognition.