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► **To cite this version:**

| Shahid Rahman. The Viva. 2023. halshs-04159924

**HAL Id: halshs-04159924**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04159924v1>**

Preprint submitted on 12 Jul 2023

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## The Viva

To all of my Students, to each one in particular

By Shahid Rahman

Lille, February 2015

As so often with this professor the ceremony started late, only a bit, but just enough to honor the solemnity of the act. The professors had a good meal, condition sine qua non in France, and this helps. Some of the members of the jury did not experience such an act before – at least not in France. They share with the candidate the same mixed feeling of excitement and concern of being guilty of some gesture profane to the rite. She is also a little stressed and all sort of things pass at the same time by her mind: the strategies of defence to the possible questions, the gaze of that professor at the right corner of the table looks particularly critical, the one in the middle seems to be absorbed by some sophisticated riddle (I hope not on my behalf), the organization of the follow up champagne and party, the last technical nuisance (the Skype-connection did not work after all), that unhappy formulation she had no time to modify, the will to leave a good impression in front of her family and friends among the public, a rapid revision of the overall structure of her speech, the professor is getting old but he looks calm and somehow happy – what a relief. Good heavens, it starts! Nope, not yet. The lights and the microphone have to be fixed and the professor is clumsy and smiles. Noo ..., he has a hole in his jumper. He is definitely getting old.

The ceremony deploys itself in an irregular rhythm of slow and very fast intervals. All started with a thoroughly regulated form of interaction – it is an exam after all – but then not anymore: it quickly develops into polyphony and passion. The candidate honors the generosity of the jury with a generosity of her own and forgets her carefully planned defensive moves and dares the will to understand. She challenges the jury and the jury is loving it and the old professor intervenes again, his temperament is winning terrain over him (someone should tell him that the advisor must refrain himself of doing so) another member of the jury with light in her eyes gesticulates vehemently as if she were writing formulae in the air. My Lord, someone needs to put an end to this whirl of questions and answers, it looks as even the public is going to take part. Stop! All at once, we looked each other and we had the feeling that from that flow of moves of giving and asking for reasons, some kind of harmony, some kind of intelligence emerged, we knew we got deeper into the matter. Absolutely, we managed to grasp it, what a beauty. The wise Greek knew it, Plato was right, at the beginnings and at the end the dialogue is.

Never! The *viva* is not about an exam, it is something else. At the very end, what animates all of us is the pursue of the beauty of collective understanding, the search for the beauty of the new insight, the seeking of that intimate sensation of lucidity and creation. The *viva* calls for a plural act of generosity: the generosity of the jury that beyond the nuisances – the modest travel tickets and accommodation, the catering restrictions of 15 euros per meal (luckily enough this excludes the lunch before the *viva*) – comes to welcome the candidate to the difficult path of academic life; the generosity of the candidate, who takes up the challenge to interact with the finest minds in the field and accepts the risk of this rite of initiation and its long lasting consequences; and the act of generosity of the institution that fixes the right place and time to perform the old rite, and last, the communion of the champagne and the wine.

Yes, all of a sudden we know: she is one of us. She really wants it. Strange, it comes up with certainty and makes us all happy and for some reason also a bit nostalgic of that day when we received the same spade on the shoulders (and the advisor misses already those days when he taught and was taught by that young rampant mind). Perhaps, someday, she will become a professor and she will have students and this will all connect us together with that initial act of generosity that took play today but that started far before.

This is the *viva* and is linked with all us from the times of yore, long live it.

Nota bene: Needless to say that the paragraphs above are not a fiction but the combinatorial composition of the *vivae* I had the honor to take part in. Every one of the colleagues could have written these lines, probably better. As Borges did it once, also I ask for forgiveness, dear colleagues, for having kidnapped these words that are of all of us.