

SYMBOL AND METAPHOR: THE SEARCH FOR THE
“HIDDEN SIDE” OF REALITY IN CONTEMPORARY
PHILOSOPHY

Contemporary concern for the ambiguous side of the human language and its connection with (or separation from) Philosophy could be a priori surprising, given that we belong to a philosophical time often dominated by the epistemological demand for rigour, for a strict approach¹ in Philosophy as well as in Science. In fact, the technological period in which we are living is leading to the accomplishment of an important dream of the Enlightenment Century: the astonishing development of “Reason”, of a reason involved in all serious gnoseological domains with its practical-technical repercussions in our mode of living.

At the same time, another “practical reason” is underlined today, as it was in the XVIIIth century, it is reason related to Ethics, to the moral inter-subjective and social behaviour involved in Ethics. This practical reason is at the core of many contemporary thinkers’ philosophy: Erich Fromm, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and diverse modes of Hermeneutics. They all warn about the danger of the so-called “instrumental reason”, which only attends to the technical side of our complex culture, avoiding the question of personal responsibility and of any approach whose language is not reducible to logic or univocity. The moral repercussion of our “mode of living together” with other persons, is abandoned by this “instrumental reason”, which encloses humans in a mechanical circle.

Nevertheless, the ultra-technological, mechanized culture cannot elude questioning its own excluding, mono-directional approach, because logic and technology are not adequate for facing the most important problems that arise from inter-personal relationships or from the indubitable human need to search for the sense of our existence. Perhaps that is the reason why we, inhabitants of a “mechanical world”, often still continue to turn our gaze away from reason and pay attention to the strange multivocal, paradoxical language which is at the root of every culture and which is expressed mainly by means of symbols and metaphors. It is not a contradiction for us, the “heirs” of the Enlightenment and of the XIXth century’s positivism and scientism, to be critical with our own roots when they only lead to an exhaustive analysis of formal language, based on univocal, logical reason,

useless for giving sense to our existence. Some philosophical tendencies even exclude this need of sense as something absurd, as a non-sense in itself.

This excluding approach implies not only the crisis of reason itself, but more importantly and above all, the crisis of the subject, of the person, and of the human being in general considered as free and responsible for his/her thinking and acting. Consequently, we are often dealing with an anthropological crisis and with negative attitudes towards the notion of the human being in general. These notions of freedom, of responsibility of the subject, etc., involve sometimes forgetting the extreme univocity, inviting us to explore the obscure, recondite path of multivocal non-rational language – a human dimension very difficult to reconcile with one of the general aims of philosophy: to tend to and if possible, reach univocity.

Furthermore, the crisis is extending to language itself. The critical theories of language have accomplished a very important task of clarifying many philosophical perspectives based on the ingenuous idea of an autonomous subject and of an evident, transparent consciousness. The so-called theories of suspicion (Nietzsche, Marx and Freud) lead us to question many of the dogmatic principles of classical and modern philosophy. Later, theories of linguistic analysis, structuralism, etc., take refuge in strict procedures – the ones which are only able to account for rational or formal-semiotic dimensions of language – in order to reach a scientific level for anthropological knowledge. The result is, in my opinion, a cul-de-sac, a blind alley, in which philosophy has been trapped for some decades. In effect, the more supposedly “scientific” anthropological-linguistic approaches are obliged to restrain their task to the limited domain of the human being. The problem is that they are perhaps strict, but also partial, given that they leave aside the human dimensions which do not fit with their established formal or methodical *a priori* assumptions. In my opinion, a serious anthropological approach can never be partial; it cannot exclude fundamental human dimensions.

It is clear that language is at the basis of any human cultural dimension, and of any mode of approaching reality. That is why Heidegger states that the main difficulty resides in language, mainly in the metaphysical attitude of Occidental languages, and he tries to explore new possibilities, extra-metaphysical possibilities which are also inherent in the “saying”,² but the problem is that human language presents many facets, which could be summarized into two fundamental ones: rational and extra-rational, both with several intermediate degrees. Moreover, one human science, linguistics, has developed extraordinarily in the XXth century and has alerted us to many confusions and doubtful preconceptions. Nevertheless, we have to admit that

language is itself a human artifice, an artificial construct, absolutely necessary for the development of the cultural dimension and, consequently, of humanization. We humans tend to elaborate on reality somehow; this becomes a human-cultural reality in the life-world. For that, why should we use such a variety of signs, univocal or multivocal, mainly visual and verbal? Why then should we avoid the consideration of the latter (multivocal, polysemic signs) as if they were destined to disappear with scientific human progress?

On the contrary, we attend to the reconsideration of non-rational human phenomena carried out by many contemporary thinkers, either by denying them any value in a critical and restrained gnoseological perspective, or by considering it as the "trace" of the search for the true basis of our ontological human roots as well as of the source of our knowledge. On the one hand, structuralism and many linguistic approaches share the first way, staying at the mere formal level. On the other hand, hermeneutics and many phenomenological attitudes prefer the second way.

I personally share the second attitude, and consider that we can never have a global anthropological knowledge without listening to, or turning our gaze towards, ambiguous phenomena like symbol and metaphor.

Another important question, related to the one mentioned above – I am referring to the opposition or the dialectics between reason and the non-rational – is also a presupposition: that is to say, the conception of reality in general and of the human reality in particular, in terms of the appearance/hiding ("hiddenness") duality.

The anthropological assumption at the basis of this second dialectic is that the human being is always mediated by something else: language, culture, society, etc., and so is, consequently, the human approach to reality.³ The problem here is that the "something else", the mediation which supposedly distorts reality, belongs in fact to the human mode of being as such. Hence, we are placed between two options; either we have to admit a rigorous but partial approach which excludes a very important aspect of human existence (a very real facet, however regarded as "illusion" from that partial approach), or we enter into the circle of a necessarily mediated being; actually the same being which has to assume the reality in a limited gnoseological perspective. It is in that context that we come to consider ambiguous phenomena like symbol and metaphor, which also belong to human language and even constitute a fundamental facet of it.

The trouble is that it is philosophy, with its rational, conceptual and univocal aim, which insists on taking into account the non-rational, symbolic

or imaginary, multivocal human phenomena, either in order to place them at an inferior level destined to disappear with human development and historical progress, or to integrate them into its rational domain.

Paul Ricoeur and Derrida are among the contemporary thinkers who assign an important place to that ambiguous language in their philosophy. Both of them depart from the so-called “second Heidegger”, with his insistence on going beyond the rational appearance of the language and directing his reflexions towards a supposed hidden dimension of being.

After some concise commentaries on the meaning of both symbol and metaphor, I would like to center my analysis on some aspects of Paul Ricoeur’s point of view,⁴ but alluding, where necessary, to Heidegger and to Derrida.

First of all, let’s briefly consider the meaning of both terms, symbol and metaphor, and, in general, their semantical field.

Symbol, from the Greek *sýmbolon*, is related to the idea of putting together, of making different things coincide, and originally the verb *bállo* means, in Greek, to throw, to project something. Metaphor, *metaphorá* in Greek, comes from *meta-féro*, to transfer, but also to confuse. Symbol means something regarded as typifying, representing or recalling something else, leading us from a first referent meaning to a second one, the latter somehow implied in the first one, as stated by Paul Ricoeur. He refers to symbols as units of meaning implying a double sense. These ambiguous “units of sense” are primary symbols, like the deviation, the exile, the erratic path, etc., in the case of the symbolism of evil, analysed by Ricoeur in the second part of *Finitude et culpabilité*.⁵ In contrast, myths are, for Ricoeur, secondary symbols, narrations, and consequently texts. They always include primary symbols, multivocal unities of meaning which constitute the first basis for the work of interpretation.⁶

Metaphor is understood, according to the Oxford Dictionary, as an application of a name or of a descriptive term given to an object to which it is not literally applicable. That is why Ricoeur alludes to it as an “unusual predication”, which always implies a semantic innovation. This idea of “semantic innovation” is a fundamental basis for understanding Ricoeur’s notion of interpretation and, in general, his hermeneutics.⁷

Symbols are placed at the level of words and their double sense. In the case of metaphor, the path towards the sentence is open, leading at the same time to the text, to the poetics of narrative. This is clarified in *Temps et récit* through the analysis of narrations.⁸ This transition is required precisely by the analysis of the metaphor, considered as an unexpected predication, as an

“impertinent” predication, always dynamic, “living” through time. Ricoeur concisely presents that idea and the role of metaphor in the following terms:

C'est avec la *Métaphore vive* que le passage du mot à la phrases s'impose à l'herméneutique elle-même. La métaphore ne se réduit pas en effet à un déplacement de la nomination d'une entité première à une entité seconde reliée à la première par la ressemblance, elle consiste en une prédication insolite ou, comme je dis, impertinente. La tâche de l'interprétation s'avère alors plus complexe que celle de délivrer un second sens caché dans un sens apparent: elle accompagne l'émergence, au niveau prédicatif, donc à celui de la phrase, d'une pertinence nouvelle sur les ruines d'une prédication inconsistante. En cela consiste la métaphore *vive*. Certes, ici aussi l'extension du mot à la phrase annonce l'extension de la phrase au texte, dans la mesure où la métaphore est un poème en miniature, donc un texte.⁹

However, the passage from the sentence to the text implies the approach between the metaphor and the narration in general, elaborating therefore the expression of semantic innovation:

Il reste que l'extension de la phrase au texte n'a été explicitement prise en compte qu'avec le couplage de la métaphore avec le récit, à l'époque de *Temps et récit*, le récit étant manifestement une composition de degré supérieur à la phrase isolée. Je forge alors le concept englobant d'innovation sémantique pour inclure sous un genre unique le texte de la poésie lyrique et le texte de la littérature narrative. Désormais, c'est le *mythos* de la tragédie et de l'épopée, selon le vocabulaire d'Aristote dans la *Poétique* qui sert de guide dans l'exploration de ce vaste empire du langage figuratif que la langue allemande place sous le titre emblématique de la *Dichtung*. C'est dans la mesure où je garde à l'esprit l'amplitude de la *Dichtung* que je donne pour tâche à l'herméneutique de rendre compte de la constitution du sens au niveau de l'innovation sémantique commune au poème et au récit. C'est par référence à cette amplitude de la *Dichtung* que je me risque à confronter dans *Temps et récit III* la philosophie phénoménologique du temps avec la “poétique” du récit, laquelle englobe le récit quotidien, la tragédie et l'épopée des anciens et des modernes et le roman contemporain.¹⁰

Poetic, creative literary language in general, brings to language and to the human being some facets, values and models for action, etc., models of reality, that are veiled for descriptive language.¹¹

In this sense, I agree with the main thesis referring to metaphor maintained in James M. Edie's article “Identity and Metaphor. A Phenomenological Theory of Polisemy”:

The argument of this paper is that there are such things as “necessary” metaphors, that metaphorical usage is not some accidental weakness of human thought, which could be avoided if only we were a bit more astute and tried a little harder to make our ideas and our language more clear, but is, on the contrary, the font of creativity not only in poetry, parable, myth and other deliberately metaphorical genres of literature, but in the very categories of the basic common language of ordinary life, of science and of philosophy.¹²

By placing the metaphorical usage of the language in the core of human creativity, Edie accords a crucial role to non-rational (in the sense of non-

The Visible and the Invisible in the Interplay between
Philosophy, Literature and Reality

Tymieniecka, A.-T. (Ed.)

2002, VII, 329 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0070-6