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Poem and Theorem: Notes on Truth and Fiction

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1. EPISTEMOLOGICAL DOUBTS

There are a few things I do not understand about which I might keep asking silly questions for a life-time: first, what a no-truth theory of literature means; second, that God exists within some language games; third, that truth is the agreement of specialists on a given topic, that is of *symposiasts* [1] after a good dinner; fourth, I cannot understand, in the field of theory, the value of the nowadays swamping pragmatism, whose procedures can at best ratify only that which is already existent [2]. There are four things I do not understand in the world, and

[1] A viable definition of this new species of the genus "Homo Sapiens" might be the following: "silly enthusiastic assertive post-something, politically correct ethically spurious, usually English-speaking specialists on a subject (tendentially ignorant of all the rest) used to participate to presumably cultural refundable meetings throughout the world".

[2] For a no-truth theory of literature, see Lamarque and Olsen (1994:1-25). They argue, for instance, as follows (4): "Although our own view rejects any essential link between truth and literature we do not hesitate to acknowledge a large number of non-essential, or contingent, links." It thus seems that they are, strangely enough, adopting an essentialist metaphysics in order to develop a pragmatic epistemology of literature. This demonstrates how difficult it is in practice to do away with traditional notions such as essence, reference, truth, etc. The language-game theory of truth-and-belief is of course one of Wittegnstein's celebrated legacies to the twentieth century mind; it has been cheerfully adopted by many self-indulgent, weak-thinking, consolatory hermeneutics. For the consensus-theory of truth, see Rorty (1980), especially the last three chapters. Habermas (1985), chapter XI. The overwhelming dominion of pragmatism in Western thought runs back at least to Kant's promotion of practical pure reason to the role of leader over the self-limiting understanding (*Critik der practischen Vernuft*, 1788). See Rorty 1982, "Introduction" and chapter IX, especially.

were I to understand all the rest I would still feel unhappy, and keep on putting trivial questions [3].

Whenever I face dangerous questions of theory, I always keep importuning myself on whether we can really dispense with such old fashioned Platonic notions as beauty, goodness, value, essence, and, naturally, truth. Of course we all know that "**truth**" may have different meanings, according to the fields of enquiry and the social/linguistic contexts in which we use this word: truth may either be the correspondence of propositions with facts, or the internal coherence of a text, or the sudden revelation of a thing or an idea, etc. Poetic truth, in particular, is the composition of at least all the three above mentioned senses of truth, which of course include beauty as their corollary. Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist* (1960:211), using Aquinas' words in a non-scholastic way, called them *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas* (wholeness, proportion and splendour).

In talking of the truth of poetry (rather than of literature at large, which is a much wider field) the first question that comes to my mind is whether there is still something worthy left to be said. If so, then the second question should regard the kind of relationship we wish to explore: say, between appearance and reality, or fact and fiction, or life experience and literary representation. Or what else? All these questions, however, entail some nexus between essence and appearance [4]. We need this just in order to think, as we need the sense/reference relationship in order to communicate and speak. In any case, we need a root difference, of some kind, in order to perceive and to represent the world. Be it difference in time: before and after; in space: here and there; or difference between time and space. Having difference of some kind, we can also project a continuum. Therefore the first problem of language (both of art and science) is: what sort of difference becomes prominent in a certain period and in a given field of discourse? In order to explore any object of enquiry, we first need to isolate this object against its background, and secondly to suspend the flux of time so as to keep the object steady

[3] This paper was originally read at a "Literature and Cognition" seminar, during the IV ESSE Symposium, held in Helsinki (25-29 August 2000).

[4] Most non-essentialist, post-modernist, "theories" of literature and culture of roughly the last thirty years seem to me mere fashionable chatter, useful at most to the publish-or-perish cultural industry of American Institutions. See Sokal (1997), for a few amusing examples of preposterous scientific blunders by some French *maîtres à penser*, especially cherished by American men/women of letters ; such is, for instance, Lacan's suggestive equation of the symbolic phallus with the imaginary number corresponding to the square root of "-1" (32) ; or Irigary's bewildering assertion that Einstein's formula for the exchanges of matter and energy ($E=Mc^2$) is a "sexed equation" (104). For those who are interested, in Sokal's book there are quite a few other amusing specimens of our recent light-hearted epistemology of human sciences.

in view and to trace a network of relationships within it. *Focusing* and *time suspension* belong to the act of perception as such. The experience of space implies as such the time rhythm of existence. Thus, when we intentionally suspend our judgement on a given event (exercising our critical faculties), when we create or perceive a work of art, or when we make love to somebody (all widely different experiences to be sure), we do not perhaps enact incomparable performances.

I rather suspect that there have always been at least "two cultures" [5] in the Western tradition, the scientific and the humanistic, because we possess at least two separate powerful brands of symbolism: numbers and letters; in the former, a quantitative difference stands out, in the latter a qualitative one. But it is only a question of prevalence. Consider for instance the four Kantian categories of the intellect: quantity, quality, relation and mode (Kant 1772: Book I). All of them work both in linguistic and in mathematical operations. The question is which is prevalent in a given social context: the dominant (the all-powerful) difference does in fact de-form the fields of action and perception in history (Mateika and Pomorska 1971:66-90).

As regards the relative value of poetry and science, the burden of proof (usually belonging to the "useless" fine arts) might well be reversed nowadays, when the quantitative, statistical, informational side of meaning is becoming overpowering in social life. Now that science and technique create a plethora of parallel worlds (cybernetic or biologic copies and versions of "things"), which are accepted as everyday matter of fact, do these global-market pervasive fictions still preserve the heuristic (cognitive, affective, moral) function of poetic fictions? In our thoroughly pragmatic civilization, is there still a place left for effective critical fictions? The time honoured problem raised by the defences of poetry throughout the ages might well now be reformulated as no longer that of the truth-value of fiction, but rather that of the fiction-value of reality.

2. PHENOMENOLOGY OF LITERATURE

Whenever I discuss the forms of literature, I always keep in mind the basic difference I have touched upon before: it is at once an ontological and a semiotic one. Phenomena, appearance, *doxa*; all the metamorphoses of reality

[5] I am of course referring to the well-known debate between F.R. Leavis and C.P. Snow in the 1960s.

and myth, and our experience thereon, stem from our assumption of a difference between appearance and being (let us still call it an "ontological difference"); it is the precondition of the logical difference between sense and reference in linguistic utterances. At any point of our lives, we presume that there is a possible difference in the issues of our actions, in order to know, to communicate, to have pleasure or pain. Now I wish to pose the following question: are the cognitive, the communicative and the erotic experiences mutually comparable? And if they are, what sorts of analogies hold among them? My hypothesis runs as follows: an **aesthetic experience** is constituted by a continuous circuit of objects of passion, communication, and knowledge (*pathemata*, *semeia* and *noemata*). In some sense, pathos comes first: we suffer the perception of things; only secondly do we trace the relations between parts and whole of the perceived object: this is an operation of semiotic and communicative order; lastly, we operate a synthesis, identifying the individual object as such, unifying the multiple sensations and relations, the perceptual variety. The individual object of cognition is always a type, a Platonic idea: there is no concrete object in experience but only multiple sensations. *The one* as such is ideal, it is a scheme, a type, a pattern. Nevertheless it is real. Otherwise how could we speak of different phenomena, or tokens, or experiences, or versions of a given world? [6]

But we ought not, in any case, to reach out too swiftly towards the *one real* (extrapolated) being and then back to the manifold experience, in order not to miss the circumstantial truth of the voyage and not to impair the pleasure of gradual discovery. We should instead suspend the plotting of time, the chrono-logical operations of before and after, cause and effect, and keep our time for a while in order to give some sense to our life experiences: "What will the spider do /, Suspend its operations, will the weevil / Delay?" – asks the little old man in Eliot's *Gerontion* (Eliot 1969:37-9). We are in fact endlessly drawn backwards by the senseless whirlwind of change into the nightmarish webs of history, like the angel in Paul Klee's picture. We are the spider (now plotting the world-wide telematic web) and the prey, and the Angel too. After the Fall (there is always a fall triggering a story), we have long felt lost in the nightmare of history. But "History may be servitude, History may be freedom" [7], like memory and time. Time may be unexpectedly redeemed when it becomes "a pattern of endless moments", in the

[6] Cf. the long-running debate, in Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy, between Goodman's irrealism and Putnam's internal realism. See Goodman 1978; Putnam 1992. Both positions are well exemplified in McCormick (1996:61-77, 179-200).

[7] This and the following quotations are from Eliot's *Four Quartets*. See Eliot 1969:171-98.

ongoing narrative of our minds. Both in individual and historical consciousness, plot (the reconstruction of the past) is rendered through speech figures [8], but these figures can appear only in the mimesis of plotted action in time: "Only through time time is conquered". Eliot's paradoxes of time, memory and history owe much to the Neoplatonic tradition, through Augustine, Bergson, Bradley etc. But his "periphrastic way" of putting the question of meaning and tradition, his rhetoric of time and history is also notably indebted to Einstein's idea of the universe. One may already perceive this debt at the beginning of the *Four Quartets*: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future"; and, reading on through the *Four Quartets*, one gets further evidence of this, as with the following lines: "The detail of the pattern is movement, / As in the figure of the ten stairs", lines that remind us of the influential implied observer of relativity and quantum theory. Modernist dominant representations of time and history have certainly something in common with early twentieth century physics and maths. What they share is at least a common rhetoric, beyond the differences of numbers and letters. Any period of history has in fact a **basic rhetoric**, unifying philosophy, science and poetry. Rhetoric is the discipline of the transfer of figures of thought in different languages. It is the *discipline* (both in a cognitive and moral sense) of translation and of tradition, of the handing over of knowledge, in different conceptual areas and experiential predicaments.

The epochal character of a text or of a theory, both in science and poetry, lies in the dominant rhetorical strategies there employed: in the use of certain distinctive oppositions; in the choice of some privileged themes, *topoi* and schemes of language and behaviour. Rhetoric may be the common tool for the understanding of the relations of science and poetry, provided that in our conception of rhetoric we somehow change the emphasis from the act of disposition to that of invention; and provided that we also keep in mind that a rhetorical figure is a linguistic type and a historical trace of sundry complex existential attitudes. What I call "existential rhetoric" may be the common ground of science and literature.

Let's take for instance the very concept of change in time: metamorphosis. Literally: change of form. But form can be conceived as versus either its background, or content or function. According to which contrast we privilege, we shall get a different concept of metamorphosis, different scientific agendas and different

[8] This has convincingly been demonstrated by Haydin White in his several works. See, for instance, White 1978: chapter IV. White is not responsible for the blatant ignorance and perverse arguments of some of his "neo-historicist", trifle-hunting and/or revisionist followers. In one of his most recent works (1999: chapter V), and with particular reference to Auerbach's idea of western literary history, White brilliantly argues for "figural causation" as being the distinctive principle of modernist historicism.

poetics. In Newton's universe, for example, the equations of movement are developed on the basic opposition between physical mass and distance; in Einstein's universe, instead, they are constructed on the difference between energy and matter. However, we need two terms and their connection, from which issue those ideal objects capable of organising our manifold experience. Geometrical objects are of a similar kind. For instance, Euclid's geometry gives us descriptions of ideal objects (or actions), according to the three dimensions of space. Descartes's geometry, instead, provides us with object descriptions based on the ratio between space and time coordinates: we might say that the former is prevalently structural, while the latter is functional. Yet science and poetry always speak the language of their time, there is a core of figures shared by them: there is an epochal rhetoric common to them.

3. GEOMETRICAL AND POETIC ARTEFACTS

I here suggest looking at poems and narratives as complex geometrical objects. Have you ever noticed that some mathematical and some rhetorical figures bear the same name: circle, parable ellipsis, hyperbole? The conics: spirals of time-space, in Yeats's A Vision. Rhetorical figures are rather similar in function to simple geometrical objects. They are a schematic outline, a discursive simplification of experience. I can think of nothing better than geometry and rhetoric together when I am faced with Kant's mysterious schematism of the intellect (Kant 1778: Book II), which should allow us to make sense of the world of experience. Conceiving poems as ideal objects of perception, in analogy with geometrical objects, might be a first step towards the development of a phenomenology of literature that is not reduced to linguistic hermeneutics.

There are a few more questions issuing from the analogy between poems and mathematical objects. The latter in fact allow us to pose and often solve problems through the application of repeatable procedures (or algorhythms). But recursive rhetorical procedures (schemata) are also the means of poetry making, and the principle of repetition-with-variation (parallelism) is the essence of poetry. Problems are therefore reasonable candidates for comparison with poems. Problem-making and poiein have in fact some features in common. They are both interrogations, attempts to make sense of the world of experience. Where they diverge is that a poem does not admit of solutions while a problem does. But if they differ in their demonstrative power, they are

quite similar in their heuristic function; or in what we may call the phase of rhetorical "invention". I dare go a step further in this direction: an oracle, a riddle is a sort of middle term between a poem and a problem. It has a poem structure and yet it allows of (at least partial) solutions.

Here are some of the questions implied by my analogy between poems and problems: is there an aesthetic and/or an erotic pleasure in problem solving? Is there a mathematical side of aesthetic experience? Does an equation imply a sender, a receiver, and a hero in action? Has an algebraic expression a story and a character? If not, why are melodies (which, as algebraic expressions, entail algorithms) sometimes said to have an ethos? Is there any difference in kind or in degree between discovering a logical truth, creating a beautiful form, and laying bare a human body (male or female)? If knowledge implies a kind of pleasure, pleasure is basically erotic, eroticism is essentially transgressive, and the taboo of incest is the threshold between nature and culture, being at the core of all cultural covenants, (Levi-Strauss 1947: chap. I); then, is the oedipal triangle intrinsic to problem solving? In this case, is it the riddle of the Sphinx that brings about the tragedy of Oedipus, or rather is it his incestuous drive that helps the hero in the riddle solution? Are the riddle and the problem-solving eventually unrelated with the tragic (poetic) pathei mathos (knowledge through suffering) and with the mythic drive towards metempsychosis, or reincarnation with loss of memory, which is after all the archetype of all poetic experience?

Here, for instance, are three quite telling riddles from the School episode (chap. II) of Joyce's Ulysses. There Stephen Dedalus is giving and receiving an evangelical lesson (the opposite of catechism, which is the theme of this episode) through several disciplines: history, poetry, and maths. The first riddle is theological: "To Caesar what is Caesar's, to God what is God's": Dedalus broods upon it. The second is historical: "The cock crew / The sky was blue: / The bells in heaven / Were striking eleven. / Tis time for this poor soul / To go to heaven": the riddle elliptically refers to the passion and death of Christ. The possible incarnation of the poetic and prophetic Word of love, through and beyond the received Scriptural Law, is in fact the main topic of the episode (Martella 1997:154-69), while the focus of this lesson given by Stephen to the spoiled rich young Dubliners shifts from history (Pyrrhus) to poetry (Milton's Lycidas), to maths (Sargent's problem-solving). The third riddle is a mathematical problem: Stephen helps a dull ungifted pupil to solve it. After this Samaritan-like act, all the substance of the Ancient Law (or the Old Testament), and the grammars of different languages are vivified and unified, in Stephen's mind, in the following wonderful picture of quintessential mimesis:

across the page the symbols moved in grave morrice, in the mummery of their letters, wearing quaint caps of squares and cubes. Give hands, traverse, bow to partner: so: imps of the fancy of the Moors. Gone too from the world, Averroes and Moses Maimonides, dark men in mien and movement, flashing in their mocking mirrors the obscure soul of the world, a darkness shining in brightness which brightness could not comprehend. (Joyce 1971:34)

A pantomime of symbols of sundry nature. An act of love towards our neighbour has finally resolved the theological, the historical and the mathematical problems into one poetic representation. The suffering Word of love made flesh can give us a reliable unified living picture of the world, for the time being. This is the basic pattern of the whole Christian-platonic symbolism in Ulysses.

4. KINDS OF SYMBOLISM

In all kinds of symbolism we can distinguish the prevalence of one of the following functions: *prescription, description, or inscription*. The first, for instance, is characteristic of Biblical texts: a barely sketched plot-plus-character charged with thick moral background (Auerbach 1968: chap. I). The second is to be found in the Homeric (and in the standard fictional) texts, containing the representation of events on the foreground, only with secondary didactic implications; the third, you can best find both in maths and in lyric poetry: that is discourses growing on themselves, aiming at the generation of objects from within, apparently regardless of any external reference. And in music too, which nevertheless, through the sense of hearing, arouses feelings and passions from the elaboration of mathematical ratios.

On the synchronic plane, the above distinction obtains: every language can either prescribe behaviours with regard to a world; or describe features of this world; or inscribe new elements in the world. As regards time, instead, language can recall things to memory, communicate a present experience, or anticipate events of the future. These logical and temporal dimensions of language, of course, obtain also in the case of its fictional uses.

On the logic plane, a language can be *assertive* (thetic and antithetic), *interrogative*, or *hypothetical*. To assertions, questions and hypotheses, in mathematics correspond respectively demonstrations, problems and theorems. Between question and assertion, there is the hypothesis; which amounts to saying that

the answers to questions imply, or use, hypotheses, in the same way as the solution of problems employ theorems. I have already suggested that, in a heuristic perspective, poetry may be compared with problem-making. My idea is now that, from a rhetorical point of view, a poem is analogous to a theorem, in the sense that it is a construct of ratios and figures, constituting a usable hypothesis for the positing and/or solving of problems. Obviously, in the case of a poem, the issues at stake are not of a purely intellectual but rather of an existential order, and the rhetorical figures constituting them have performative and affective, more than informative, character.

We all know that language is a complex tool: it can privilege connections with either social norms, or 'natural' worlds, or its own technique. It can prevalently be oriented towards what must be, what is, or what can be. That is, it may prevalently be *normative, mimetic, or inventive*. The creative language *par excellence* is that of mathematics, because it seems not to have to comply with any sensorial bonds. Mathematical creativity is only indirectly and holistically conditioned by the human body. Precisely because it is not directly linked to any human experience or to any aspect of the world, maths is generally the most reliable and effective of disciplines.

Mathematical language schematises and articulates the perceptual and operative relations between man and his world, in its objectivity and totality. Therefore, its propositions are usable and effective at any unforeseen time for the solution of historically contingent problems. **Poetic language**, while being originally referential, conative and affective, when turning upon itself, imitating mathematical self-referentiality, becomes as viable as the other one for the occasional positing or solving of existential problems. At the point at which it becomes autonomous, poetic language does not eschew its mimetic function, but on the contrary allows on principle the global, integral and realistic (impersonal and "disinterested") representation of man's predicament.

We might assume at this stage that between Saussure's structural and Jakobson's functional linguistics there is a difference similar to that (which I have previously pointed out) between descriptive classical geometry and analytical Cartesian geometry. Let us now quickly recall Jakobson's typology of the main linguistic functions. As is well known, it implies six basic factors of linguistic communication: sender, context, message, contact, code, and receiver. According to the prevailing orientation of the utterance towards one of these factors, Jakobson distinguishes six corresponding *functions of language*: emotive, referential, poetic (or self-referential), phatic (contact), metalinguistic, and conative. He rightly remarks that the difference of messages is not based on the monopoly of any of these functions, but rather on the shifting hierarchy among them, and that the verbal structure of a message depends above all on the dominating function. Language can

accordingly be studied through the difference of its functions, and the poetic function for the place it has among the others.

In this classification, no reference is made to mathematical language, but the argument can be easily extended to it. Mathematical language seems exclusively oriented on the message and on the code, that is on the poetic and metalinguistic functions, which are apparently mutually antithetical, the former being eminently generative, the latter definitory. Maths fuses in a unique process the poetic and the metalinguistic functions of ordinary language. Meanwhile, the other functions are not erased but only temporarily suspended or put within brackets. References to the sender, the receiver, the world, and the channel of communication are momentarily neutralised but still subsist in mathematical operations. Thus the reference of the mathematical utterance to its environment is virtual, objective, and holistic.

Poetic language, on the other hand, not differing in this from mathematical language, constructs its utterances through a process of selection and combination of symbols. When Jakobson gives us his famous definition of poetry - "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to that of combination. The equivalence is promoted to the degree of constitutive element of the sequence" (Jakobson 1960:356) - he is but noticing, in the field of poetry, a movement of ordinary language towards the ideal autonomy and creativity of mathematical language.

Mathematical language is the most *poetic* and the least emotive language we have. The emotive and the constructive functions of language seem indeed to be antithetical: the impersonal theory of art held by such authors as Flaubert, James, Eliot, Joyce etc., does in fact only recognise this state of affairs. But human experiences are also always emotionally coloured. Poetry must then strike a delicate balance between the expression of emotions and the mimesis of events, between subject and object, between token and type. Its basic patterns are the rhetorical figures, provided they be conceived as discursive types of existential attitudes (*dispositio*) as well as instruments for the invention of new worlds (*inventio*).

When recoiling upon itself, poetic language is indeed not escaping the world of experience, but rather defending itself from the intrusive power of emotions and feelings, and drawing for the subject of experience a temporary area of freedom from the tyranny of passion and action, in order that he can beget some knowledge form his pleasure and pain. Similarly, mathematical language has on principle set itself free from the world of experience and from its constraints only in order to be, on occasions, the tool of some new and more effective description of that world.

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