

From the Linguistic Turn to the Pictorial Turn — Hermeneutics Facing the ‘Third Copernican Revolution’

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ABSTRACT. In this article, I will deal with the role of pictures within discussions on the crisis of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics. Firstly, I will argue that some of the aporias this debate runs up against can be overcome by a reconsideration of the traditional dualism of word and image. In this regard my reference point is Paul Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor. His model of the living metaphor overcomes the difficulties posed by the hermeneutics of the symbol and restores the image to an internal force *within* language: image seeks language to give itself form, and language seeks image to feed on new meanings. Secondly, I will reconstruct some aspects of the interdisciplinary debate around the so-called ‘pictorial turn’, in which, I will argue, very interesting features can be identified that Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor merely foreshadows. In this reactivation of the role of pictures, the debate concerning the outcomes of twentieth-century hermeneutics can probably make new claims on our attention.

In *Picture Theory*, one of the seminal texts on the *pictorial turn* in contemporary philosophy, W.J.T. Mitchell proposes a definition of the relationship between text and image that has met with a certain success in the debate around *Visual Culture*. Mitchell aims to identify the picture as the subject that various disciplinary traditions – from philosophy to semiotics, from the arts to media studies – end up converging upon nowadays. He explains that if there is one thing that these disciplines tell us incontrovertibly, it is the impossibility of considering the visual as a ‘pure’ field of representation, that stands in extrinsic relation to the verbal: “The interaction of pictures and texts is constitutive of representation as such” (Mitchell, 1994, p. 5).

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Picture Theory provides this interaction with a theoretic framework based on a tripartite model. The two terms can be considered (1) in the form of the *imagetext*, that is of “composite, synthetic works (concepts) that *combine* image and text”; (2) they can be brought back to the model of the *image/text*, to highlight the existence of “a problematic *gap*” or a “cleavage” between the two media, thus accentuating a sort of “rupture” in the field of representation; or (3) one can emphasize the possibility of “*relations* of the visual and the verbal”, and for this purpose Mitchell turns to the category of *image-text* (Mitchell, 1994, p. 89, my emphasis).

Although this is a hypothesis that poses several problems with regard to its cross-disciplinary applicability, it has at least one obvious merit: it sums up in specific terms the discussion concerning the fortunes and shortcomings of the linguistic turn during the twentieth century. The aim of this article is to make use of Mitchell’s categories, in particular that of *imagetext*, to reflect on a part of that debate. For this purpose, I will consider the relation between the verbal and the visual according to two different figures, both dependent on the Kantian metaphor of the Copernican revolution. To express this hypothesis in a preliminary way, it consists above all in the idea that twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics represents a sort of ‘second Copernican revolution’: a revolution in which the aesthetic background of thinking comes to the fore and becomes unavoidable. In taking this line I will follow above all indications from Paul Ricoeur and some of his interpreters. In the second part of my article, I will suggest that the limits of such a response, highlighted by the so-called pictorial turn, prefigure the possibility of a ‘third Copernican revolution’, in which prevail not simply extra-descriptive languages – as in Ricoeur’s case – but sense constructions based on the picture and on its (extra-)textuality.

1. Hermeneutics as a Second Copernican Revolution

The hypothesis that philosophical hermeneutics represented, in the course of the twentieth century, a sort of second Copernican revolution can be argued in many ways. It is worthwhile recalling the significance assumed by this connotation at the hands of one of hermeneutics’ key figures, Paul Ricoeur.

The point of entry to the question is represented by what has justly been defined as Ricoeur's *phenomenological heresy* (Aime, 2007, p. 52). By this expression, as is well known, is meant the progressive distancing of his thought from Edmund Husserl's premises. It is a reconsideration culminating in the idea that the thematization of subjectivity cannot make use of the Husserlian method of the description of essences, but must "introduce into the circle of reflection the long detour by way of the symbols and myths transmitted by the great cultures" (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 16)¹. This is a crucial decision for Ricoeur's hermeneutics, such that from it derives the fundamental formula accompanying his departure from the phenomenological tradition, and which is summed up in the motto "The symbol gives rise to thought" (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 347)².

The fortune of this statement is well known and has been dissected in every possible way by commentators. But to appreciate fully its consequences it is useful to take a step backwards and discuss its singular genealogy. In fact this formula contains a clear Kantian connotation, that the interpreters themselves have sometimes overlooked (cf. Amherdt, 2004, pp. 72-73, fn. 40). The reference, that touches very closely upon what Ricoeur wants to express, is to what the third *Critique* says about aesthetic ideas. Let me recall a passage of §49 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* ('On the Faculties of the Mind that Constitute Genius'): speaking of the *spirit in an aesthetic significance* (*Geist in ästhetischer Bedeutung*), Kant defines it as "the faculty for the presentation of aesthetic ideas", an aesthetic idea being "that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking [die viel zu denken veranlaßt] though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible" (Kant, 2000, p. 192).

It will be Ricoeur himself, in *Freud and Philosophy*, to allude openly to the notion of aesthetic idea³. However the Kantian tone of the pages of

¹ The critical literature on Ricoeur's 'long detour' is vast. The main reference is undoubtedly Greisch, 2001, chap. III.

² On the fortune of this formula, cf. François Dosse's fundamental reconstruction: Dosse, 2001, pp. 312-317. It is useful, however, to recall also the map drawn by Amherdt, 2004, pp. 41ff., who takes account in particular of the theological reception of the topic.

³ Ricoeur represents the reference to Kant in the following terms: "Symbols give rise to thought, I said [in *The Symbolism of Evil*], using a phrase from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*."

The Symbolism of Evil dedicated to the motto “The symbol gives rise to thought” goes well beyond this reference. It is here, in fact, that Ricoeur makes explicit the possibility of considering the hermeneutics of the symbol in terms of a second Copernican revolution (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 356)⁴.

Let us try to understand what this means for Ricoeur. To affirm that “the symbol gives rise to thought” means recognizing that it represents a hint towards something other – this is the case, for example, of the role of the symbol in the complex symptomatology articulated by psychoanalysis. From Ricoeur’s perspective, such otherness represents the residue and the insuperable symptom of the fact that there is something that *precedes consciousness* and that never allows itself to be exhausted in the exercise of thinking. Thence, the strongest reason for the heresy – or at this point, the schism – with regard to phenomenology. A reason, however, that Ricoeur articulates from an ontological standpoint: to choose a hermeneutical approach to the problem of symbolic language implies in fact that one considers the symbol “as an index of the situation of man at the heart of the being in which he moves, exists, and wills” (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 356). Or, in still more explicit terms, it means affirming that “the symbol gives reason to think that the *Cogito* is within being and not vice versa” (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 356).

Expressed in these terms, the Kantian origin of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic turn is of great interest in clarifying issues of relevance to his abandonment of phenomenology. Some commentators (cf. Tengelyi, 1998) radicalize the Kantian influence further, suggesting a decisive connection to the notion of the thing in itself and, with reference to the pre-critical writings, to the discussion on the *a priori* proof of God’s existence. To read the theme of the symbol from this angle means tracing Ricoeur’s hermeneutic turning point to a specific idea: the work of the concept (in Kant: the application of the categories) cannot occur in the absence of presuppositions, that is without something that precedes the concept itself. Which represents a

ment. Symbols give, they are the gift of language; but this gift creates for me the duty to think, to inaugurate philosophic discourse, starting from what is always prior to and the foundation of that discourse” (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 38).

⁴ The need for a repetition of the Copernican revolution already occurs in Ricoeur, 1952, p. 140. For the fluctuations that this formula undergoes in the course of Ricoeur’s thinking, cf. Kenzo, 2009, pp. 100-103 (particularly fn. 24).

fair approximation of Ricoeur's own theoretical intentions: if something precedes the concept, it declares itself precisely in the symbols that the culture deposits in the subject (Tengelyi, 1998, pp. 118-121).

From a historical perspective, these connections outline a scenario that is not without ambiguity and would be thus worthy of careful evaluation. But the most relevant factor, at least for the development of Ricoeur's thought, rests in the fact that the Copernican reference must not be understood as a counter-revolution with respect to Kantian transcendentalism. The correct interpretation is more subtle, because his real critical target is the Husserl of phenomenological reduction. Better, the claim for a second Copernicanism amounts to *the choice to use Kant against Husserl*. In other words, it is as though Ricoeur were to say that the transcendental turn is without doubt a point of no return for modern philosophy, but that the outcome which Husserl's *Ideen* purported to derive from it should be seriously questioned. Hence the reason for Ricoeur's heresy⁵.

2. A Third Copernican Revolution?

2.1. Symbol and Metaphor

For Ricoeur, the reference to the second Copernican revolution has then a clear significance, that of highlighting the existence of 'symbolic paradigms' that determine the very possibility of reflection. From his perspective, this heteronomy of reflection – which is the real common trait of twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics – assumes however a specific declension, which is determined precisely by the reference to the

⁵ Here Ricoeur has the merit of formulizing the real stakes that underlie the history of the phenomenological movement after Husserl's *Ideen*. The key issue is again that of the presupposition, or rather the lack of the presuppositions, that should constitute the methodological premise of the exercise of reflection. To proceed in this direction would in fact mean remaining within "the enchanted enclosure of consciousness of oneself" (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 356). On the contrary, the attention to symbolic language is of a piece with the critique of the self-positing of the subject: it is in brief "an essential step in the constitution of a decentered self" (Kenzo, 2009, p. 104), where the sense of decentering stands precisely in the recognition that one gains access to subjectivity only by means of the long detour by way of symbols. Cf. also Tengelyi, 1998, pp. 132-133, including references not only to Ricoeur, but also to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and to Martin Heidegger.

Kantian notion of aesthetic idea. Let me compare §49 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* with the hermeneutic motto on symbolism: for Ricoeur, the symbol is really “that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking” – or that *gives rise to thought*, according to the translation that he would have preferred –, in other words that representation “which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible” (Kant, 2000, p. 192). The symbolic paradigm of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is *tout court* an ‘aesthetic paradigm’, at least in the Kantian sense of the term: it is a background of thinking, a horizon of meanings not immediately subject to logic, from which the concept draws its own resources.

If this is an undoubted acquisition for Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of the symbol, things change when he extends the discourse to the issue of metaphor. It is a shift that might seem of little import, and in fact Ricoeur tries to conceive it as a mere generalization of his discussion on the symbol and its polysemy. However this attempt is destined to fail, and for reasons which have to do precisely with the specific difference between the performances of metaphoric and symbolic language. The central point of the matter is soon stated. Metaphor is not only an instrument of linguistic innovation, which is also true, in a broad sense, of symbolic language. Before that, it works as a *device for visualization*, for the construction of images by means of words – and only in this way is metaphor able in its turn to produce new meanings.

The central place that this connotation occupies is the most evident feature of Ricoeur’s Aristotelianism. In the well-known passage of the *Poetics*, that speaks of the qualities of the poet skilled in producing apt metaphors, Aristotle explains that skill in metaphor “cannot be acquired from another, and is a sign of natural gifts: because to use metaphor well is to discern similarities” (*Poetics*, 1459a 5-8). He says as much in the *Rhetoric*, though no longer with regard to the poet but to language itself: metaphor is a device which is able to “bring-before-the-eyes” the relations that speech sets up, for example those between the inanimate and the animate, between the abstract and the concrete (*On Rhetoric*, 1410b 33).

Although we are dealing with an entirely traditional definition, here we are before a fundamental shift in Ricoeur’s analysis, that must be given due emphasis. It is in fact entirely evident that the Kantian paradigm of aesthetic idea is by no means applicable to metaphor: precisely by virtue

of the Aristotelian background in which it is placed, Ricoeur's *metaphor is not at all a representation of the imagination which 'no language fully attains or can make intelligible'*. To put it bluntly: constructing good metaphors means exactly the opposite, it means using certain linguistic performances to generate an increase in the legibility (or, rather, in the visibility) of the real.

The metaphor and the symbol, then, represent two radically different ways of relating the visual and the verbal. To define the connection between metaphorization and visualization, however, a further step is necessary to clarify the logical function which the metaphor takes upon itself. In this perspective, metaphor functions as the point of equilibrium between two phenomena: on the one hand, the twisting of the 'logical habits' of the speakers, in other words the decision to effect an act of synthesis between a subject and a predicate that are apparently irreconcilable, as is the case in even the most banal metaphor (for example, 'This man is a lion'); on the other, the possibility of controlling this twisting by means of a relationship of similarity between elements, which renders the category mistake comprehensible ('This man has certain traits which are usually predicated of lions').

This synthetic operation – that Ricoeur connotes in terms of a device for 'reduction of the shift' – is particularly powerful, if one considers that it works not in subordination to an established synthesis between subject and predicate, but as an alternative and in opposition to it. Now, if metaphor is to take this task upon itself, here much is at stake that regards its ability to work with similarity. And to do so by means of instruments that pull down the traditional distinction between word and image. In other words, metaphor works if and only if it is able to render an otherwise incomprehensible synthesis effective – but this result is guaranteed only by virtue of a linguistic device that, to paraphrase Aristotle, 'brings before the eyes' an invisible relation between subject and predicate. Without this passage through visualization, the metaphoric utterance would remain to all effects mute.

If the matter stands thus, the central place of metaphorization in our speech habits seems to force, even beyond Ricoeur's avowed intentions, a profound reconsideration of his hermeneutic model: a reformulation that issues above all from a conception in which the image plays a fundamental

role in determining the rules for using words (for example, the rules of predication).

2.2. *Towards a Pictorial Turn*

If my opening remarks were right, one might search in the field of *Visual Culture* for clues to solve the aporias posed by Ricoeur's approach to symbol. From this perspective, it is no coincidence that for W.J.T. Mitchell, independently of Ricoeur's premises, precisely metaphoric language is a model for the redefinition of the relationship between words and images. Let us read then what Mitchell writes about the notion of *pictorial turn*:

Whatever the pictorial turn is, then, it should be clear that it is not a return to naive mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial 'presence': it is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of *a picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality* (Mitchell, 1994, p. 16, my emphasis).

This is one of the many passages that could be cited to clarify what is at stake in Mitchell's discourse. A stake that clearly has to do with the semantic difference – a difference that, unlike other languages, English renders evident – between *picture* and *image*. It is in brief the idea that the picture is a structure of complex significance, that combines on the one hand the material nature of the medium – we might say its contingency, its being a support placed in a specific time and place – and on the other its capacity to contain something that survives the destruction of its material support⁶.

Although not exactly coextensive with this distinction, the notion of *imagetext*, that I referred to at the outset, expresses the same difficulty.

⁶ "What is the difference between a picture and an image? I like to start from the vernacular, listening to the English language, in a distinction that is untranslatable into German: 'you can hang a picture, but you can't hang an image.' The picture is a material object, a thing you can burn or break. An image is what appears in a picture, and what survives its destruction – in memory, in narrative, and in copies and traces in other media. [...] Picture, then, is the image as it appears in a material support or a specific place" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 16).

Or, better, it states the impossibility of considering a radical separation between the content of an image and its material side, for example in the form of a text. When Mitchell speaks of the imagetext as of a composite, synthetic work that combines image and text, he is referring to precisely this difficulty: in so far as it is an “immaterial entity, a ghostly, fantasmatic appearance”, the image “comes to light or comes to life (which may be the same thing) in a material support” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 18); it has radical need of a support which – so to speak – keeps it alive.

There are many reasons to justify the juxtaposition of Ricoeur’s analysis of metaphoric language (and its aporias) with Mitchell’s approach to the issue of the image. But the most interesting fact is that, by completely independent paths and from autonomous perspectives, Ricoeur and Mitchell end up drawing two specular approaches to a single problem: that concerning the possibility (in Ricoeur’s case) or the necessity (in Mitchell’s case) of containing, enclosing the image within the utterance (or the text).

This is the real point upon which Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor depends – and which, on Mitchell’s side, calls for a rethinking of the model within which the western tradition has conceived the dualism of word and image. They are two symmetrical perspectives, because in Ricoeur the metaphor – language through images – is the condition by virtue of which language itself can be said to be alive: such that, it is blatantly the case that we cannot imagine coining new metaphors in Latin or Ancient Greek. While on the contrary, for Mitchell, the material support is the condition for the survival of the image, both in the sense of the imagetext, and in the more general context of his theory of the picture. Nonetheless, the hypothesis of the third Copernican revolution, that I referred to at the outset, finds here its *raison d’être*. It is the idea that a revolution based on the notion of the symbol and on its pre-eminence with regard to reflection is necessary in order to include in our understanding a series of elements that are irreducible to the acts of intentional subjectivity, and that precede them, thus giving rise to thought. But at the same time, it is the hypothesis that such distancing from the phenomenological model, that with Ricoeur we can connote as a ‘second Copernican revolution’, is *not yet sufficient* to account entirely for the way in which representations of the imagination enrich language.

The discovery of the symbol, beyond the boundaries of phenomenology, is fundamental to the twentieth-century hermeneutic turn. But it is also at the root of its intrinsic inadequacy, an inadequacy that touches upon the impossibility of reducing the reality of extra-conceptual meanings to symbolic language alone. From this point of view, the same limits that Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the symbol repeatedly comes up against depend on the choice of an aporetic paradigm such as that we have recalled paraphrasing Kant: that is on the preference for a model in which symbolic language remains at the stage in which it is unable to 'attain' the work of the imagination or to 'make it intelligible'. But this fundamentally aporetic nature of the relationship between symbolic language and the signifying power of the image seems to be a general trait of all those hermeneutic perspectives that are more or less directly indebted to Ricoeur's model. A clear shift in the analysis then becomes necessary: a displacement in which it is not only the extra-logical background of reflection to come to the fore, but it is *tout court* the issue of the image *inside* language that gives rise to thought. In this reactivation of the role of the image – that the pictorial turn seems, unlike the linguistic turn, able to provide – the discussion concerning the outcomes of twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics can probably make new claims on our attention.

Translation by Hero Lotti

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