Metaphor, Poiesis and Hermeneutical Ontology: Paul Ricoeur and the Turn to Language

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Reacting against the turn to transcendence that heavily characterized the medieval worldview, the modern worldview is fundamentally exemplified by a threefold turn to immanence, consisting of a subjective turn, a linguistic turn and an experiential turn. Language plays a pivotal role here since it mediates between the subjective and the experiential. Ricoeur's treatment of metaphor, significantly laid out in his *The Rule of Metaphor*, is crucial in bringing about this linguistic turn that mediates the subject and its experience of the world. Through an analysis of "seeing as" as a poietic reconfiguration of reality in the subject's experience, language transforms and founds the world as a "being as." What is disclosed in this interpretative transformation of reality is not simply an hermeneutical ontology but possibly—also through language—an hermeneutical axiology.

The three turns of interiority

Persons are never transparent to each other. Every level of relation that one establishes with someone, or even something other than oneself, is equivalent to a corresponding point in the range of opacity and translucency, but none attains that stage of absolute clarity, awareness, or knowledge that has traditionally been attributed exclusively to the omniscience of a transcendent Deity. It is interesting to note that Charles Dickens peculiarly entitled the third chapter of his historical novel *A Tale of Two Cities* as "The Night Shadows" and introduced it thus: "A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other." Other actual entities that constitute our contemporaneous universe, that form the elements with which we define and qualify our existence, are masses of weasel beings that escape us the moment our hand clasp them. Dickens continues to illustrate this mystery thus,

> A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it![1]

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[1] Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1991), 11.

In Dickens' depiction, the gradual revelation of mystery from the secrets of each house, to the secrets of each room, to the secret of each heart stopped short in the intimacy of two beating hearts. Would it not be a better truism to say that not only a heart is a secret to the one nearest it, but that it is a secret even unto *itself*?

The theme of inwardness, especially in the intellectual history of the west, is a long narrative of introspection, of reflection and recollection unto the recesses of oneself: from the Greek injunction "know thyself" to Augustine's *in interiore homine*, to the Cartesian Cogito. They are all shifting positions, so to speak, of a man becoming restlessly still, in the uncomfortable question of self-identity. The turn to interiority dawned upon the West in general, and the Christian community in particular, with the advent of the Renaissance in Italy.[2] This is composed of two forces that strongly reshaped the predominantly social and peripheral contours of the religious community starting from the 15th century onwards.[3] The first was the secularism that characterized the creative and scholarly retrieval of the ancient classics of Greece and Rome. It is an interiority that falls under the shadow of an emerging loss of transcendence. More than a glorification of the symbolic cosmos, it was thoroughly secular in its orientation: a passionate attention to the material, the mundane, the human. The second was the intensified individualism that came as a result of the increased study of Roman law and the medieval influence of nominalism. The Renaissance was a change of cultural climate that ushered a transformation of conceptualities, self-identities and social allegiances.

One may argue that this topography of inwardness that embraces something in the innermost feelings of one's heart has taken three turns in recent developments in speculative thought: the turn to the subject, the turn to language, and the turn to experience.

To ponder on the "three turns" of inwardness is to think of the subject's intensifying self-knowledge of the constitution of his or her world. In inwardness, there is the recuperation of a primeval relation of the self with the external world, and this recuperation is achieved by a reexamination of the constitution of the inquirer itself, the Ego. Finding that the Ego does not sufficiently plot the constitution of reality for the subject, what was awakened was an interest in language as strategic to the question of the meaning of human nature. This awakening ushered in the linguistic turn. This turn however was not primarily a question of the self expressing itself but of acknowledging that language constitutes the self and structures the world in which the self is couched.

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[2]The splintering of the social consciousness that pervaded the West before the advent of the Renaissance was satisfactorily summarized by Jacob Burckhardt as follows: "In the Middle Ages both sides of the human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air [with the advent of the Renaissance].... [M]an became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such." From *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 143.

[3]See Robert Nisbet, *The Social Philosophers: Community and Conflict in Western Thought* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1973), 193.

Finding that language itself is problematic by being inherently constrained, the turn of reflexivity moved into the most primordial instance of self-constitution, the domain of experience.

It is not the goal here to explicate on all three turns to interiority that mark the contemporary history of thought. What is crucial in this presentation is to note how the linguistic turn mediated both the turn to the subject and the turn to experience. The goal of this paper is to show the relevance of Paul Ricoeur and the specific contribution he makes in explicating this mediation in the threefold turn to immanence.

The linguistic turn of Ricoeur

The linguistic turn can be understood as a turn to inwardness if one takes language not simply as a vector of ideas to achieve communication, but as a means of self-reflexivity. It is not the case that we feel something (say hunger) and in order to satisfy this we formulate intelligible words, adequately formed in such a way that once we verbalize this feeling another person can understand it. Language is not exclusively uni-directional; it is also reflexive. It means that language acquisition is the acquisition of a skill so as to present ourselves to ourselves. Language is an achieved subtlety of conceptual thought, a higher synthesis of speculation, in a manner that the ferment of intelligence may be objectified to ourselves so that we can come to know ourselves more deeply and intimately. Language makes the self transparent to itself.

Paul Ricoeur is famous for bringing the theory of hermeneutics into phenomenology. Indeed, he argues that the very aim of phenomenology is achieved through a detour towards hermeneutics. The study of that which appears becomes relevant and meaningful because that which presents itself to me, the phenomenon, calls for an interpretation. Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology is a sustained analysis of the phenomenon as quintessentially textual. This issues from an evolution of interest on the word (rhetoric), to the sentence (semantics), to the discourse (hermeneutics). The meaning of human existence lies neither in the lexical definition that a dictionary provide, nor in the tension between particular words and the sentence that these words constitute propositionally. Rather, human existence becomes meaningful in discourse—in the language that is spoken or uttered. Language is not just a system of signifier and signified. It needs to actualize itself in the event of discourse by realizing the linguistic competence inherent in human nature. Ricoeur can easily subscribe to Charles Taylor's assessment that we are language animals. To quote Taylor: "the question of language is somehow strategic for the question of human nature, that man is above all the language animal."[4] However, for Ricoeur, language is not just a means. It is not reduced to a mere instrument to convey meaning from the subject's inner mental world towards the externality and objectivity of discourse relations. Language becomes the very fabric of human existence. "Just as language, by being actualized as discourse, surpasses itself as system and realizes

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[4]Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 216.

itself as event, so too discourse, by entering the process of understanding, surpasses itself as event and becomes meaning."[5] The very meaning-constitution of human existence is linguistic. Reality becomes textuality. A phenomenology of human existence is a phenomenology of reading because that which presents itself, presents itself as needing interpretation. Ontology is symbolic, and "the symbol gives rise to thought."[6] To understand reality, one needs to interpret reality. This is Ricoeur's idea of the hermeneutic circle. According to him, "hermeneutics proceeds from a prior understanding of the very thing that it tries to understand by interpreting it."[7] If this transaction between understanding and interpretation is crucial in the hermeneutic project, what arises is the conviction that all forms of mediation are mediations of and by the text. The objective reality becomes textual—an organized narrative composition; and the self itself becomes a narrative identity. "To understand is to understand oneself in front of the text."[8] We can see clearly that for Ricoeur, the text is the bridge between the subjectivity of the self and the objectivity of the world. For him, the linguistic turn is not just anthropological or hermeneutic, rather, it is ontological. Reality, therefore, is textual.

The living metaphor

To put language within the ambit of a phenomenology of reading is to decenter textuality from the author of the text and towards the reader and interpreter. Precisely because of the distanciation that results in the very act of writing, in the act of composition of discourse into a text, the text becomes unleashed from the authorial intention. The text becomes the subject of a multitude of interpretations corresponding to, and probably doubly more than, the number of interpreters themselves. What results from this decentering is that language becomes less of a vehicle for thought (of the speaker or author), and more of a disclosing force to bring reality to light (for the reader or interpreter). The disclosure of reality being inherent in language began in the phenomenological study of symbols particularly evident in Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil*. However, although symbols lead to a restorative hermeneutics that rehabilitate what may be referred to as original meanings, the referring ability of symbols fail to take notice of the continuous emergence of novelty, the irreverent dynamics of creativity and the restless play of imagination. It is on this regard that Ricoeur started to focus on metaphor in his exploration of the truth-disclosing force of language in his *The Rule of Metaphor*. It is not my goal here to enter thoroughly into all the argumentation present in this book. What needs to be said is that he finds Aristotle's definition of metaphor intriguing: "the transfer of a word to a being that in the first instance defined another thing." He understands metaphor as having three levels: metaphor at the level of the word is the domain of rhetoric; metaphor

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[5]Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II,* trans. by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (London: Athlone, 1991), 78.

[6]Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil,* trans. by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 352.

[7]Ibid.

[8]*From Text to Action*, 88.

at the level of the sentence is the domain of semantics; and metaphor at the level of discourse is the domain of hermeneutics. According to Aristotle, metaphor belongs to rhetoric in the important sense of disclosing reality: "to set the scene before our eyes." It brings reality, or at least a part of reality, to light. However, metaphor is not only in rhetoric. It is also in poetics, and here, its important function is to organize and structure. This function of organization and structuring is an inflation of language as creative of reality. Creativity in metaphor within the category of poetics creates reality for the reader— and yes, transforms the reader also in the process.

The transfer of meaning in metaphor is exemplified in what Ricoeur refers to as "seeing as." A metaphor allows one to see something in a new light. An ordinary ring can be seen differently; a familiar cup can disclose something that was formerly hidden; a second reading of a particular text opens up perspectives that were previously missed out. This aspect of "seeing as" of metaphor highlights the figurative character of language, and by extension, the figurative character of the whole of reality. A lacuna is opened up in "seeing as" that frees language and unfolds its inherent disclosive freedom towards creativity. Herein lies the emphasis that Ricoeur gives, in the sense that metaphors, and good ones at that, should be living metaphors, lively metaphors, new metaphors. Such will disclose and recreate reality by structuring and organizing it. Metaphor then is not simply disclosive in the sense of laying bare what already is the case but which may have been forgotten or overlooked. If this is the case, then metaphor still functions within the category of *mimesis* as understood by Plato (i.e., imitation). Inherent in metaphor is *mimesis* as understood by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Here, mimesis is not simply imitation but involves *poiesis*, that is, making: "it is the specifically human activity of creating one thing to be like another thing."[9] Here, the metaphorization of language becomes the metaphorization of reality. In the *Rule of Metaphor*, one becomes aware of the metaphorization of being itself. "Seeing as" founds reality as "being as." This is the very structure of Ricoeur's hermeneutic ontology: that being presents itself, discloses itself in need of interpretation.

Towards a hermeneutical axiology

If in Ricoeur one sees the mediation of the three turns to immanence by a recourse to language, does this linguistic also mediate ontology with axiology? I believe that the answer to that is yes. Ricoeur's turn to language in contemporary philosophy, along with other "continental" philosophers who had taken the linguistic turn in their thinking (e.g. Heidegger, Gadamer, Charles Taylor) is distinct from the turn to language found in the Analytic Tradition (e.g. Wittgenstein, Austin, etc.). In the analytic tradition, the emphasis on language is more on language as a medium for the description of reality, and this very description becomes the function of language's propositional truth. Furthermore, language is taken generally as uni-directional, as the commerce of thought from one's mind and how the ideas contained in this mind find their way towards the objective world through

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[9]Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur* (London: Routledge, 2003), 62.

linguistic schemes. Language here becomes expression. In the analytic tradition, language follows the concept of *mimesis* found in Plato: it is the representation of ideas into sensible forms, and truth here becomes a matter of correspondence. In Ricoeur, there are elements that may be constituted in order to develop a hermeneutical axiology. This will not be difficult because Ricoeur paves the way towards a rehabilitation of the originary link between being and values such as goodness, beauty and truth. One needs to remember that for Aristotle, these transcendentals are intimately related by an appeal to an analogy of being, *analogia entis*. Each of the transcendentals discloses one another because each implicates the other by way of analogy in view of that to which each one appeals to. Hence, in being, goodness is already implied since goodness is that to which the will is oriented, truth is implied since truth is that to which reason is oriented, etc. The disclosure of the metaphorical character of being ("being as") is founded on the subject's capacity for a "seeing as," a mode of imaginative thinking that renders reality as subject to a multiple of meanings.

As Ricoeur himself summarizes, "Metaphor is living not only to the extent that it vivifies a constituted language. Metaphor is living by virtue of the fact that it introduces the spark of imagination into a 'thinking more' at the conceptual level. This struggle to 'think more,' guided by the 'vivifying principle,' is the 'soul' of interpretation." (*The Rule of Metaphor* 303).