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Paul Ricoeur and the Metaphor of the Symphony (on the Title of the Issue)

It is necessary to take all the arts together. There is music because next to it there is painting, theater, etc. In the *symphony of the arts* [*my italics*] there are gradations where language goes decrescendo, from the novel, the theater, the story, down to music, passing by way of painting, sculpture and the intermediary arts. There will always remain in language this superiority, that it permits us to speak about music. Are there arts, then, including music, without the reflexive capacity of language, which is trying to give names to these moods (*humeurs*)? (...) Is not this work absolutely parallel in language to what is done outside of language by the arts not transcribable into language, like music basically, but also, in different degrees, painting and sculpture? The possibility of 'speaking about' belongs doubtless to the character of significance attached to verbal signs and non-verbal signs and to their capacity to be interpreted mutually. Music makes us think (*donne à penser*) perhaps by making us speak (*en donnant à parler*). (...) [However] this is again a manner of speaking, for it is also a mark of language that words are lacking: it is a matter of a lack in language. Perhaps all the arts are also lacking in one fashion or another. *In what?* (...) Probably in (...) what we call the ineffable, the unformed, which is only partially exhausted by the forms [P. Ricoeur]¹.

The title of "Logoi" (I, 2, 2015) recalls this passage from Paul Ricoeur, taken from *Arts, Language and Hermeneutic Aesthetics. Interview conducted by Jean-Marie Brohm and Magali Uhl (September 20, 1996 in Paris)*, a text translated into Italian for the first time in this issue.



Rembrandt van Rijn, Musical Allegory, 1626,
63.5 x 48 cm.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The expression used by Ricoeur is *symphony of the arts*. In fact, this is what we mainly mean by the title *Symphony of Languages*: symphony of the logoi, corresponding to the sections of our magazine: art, literature, music, cinema.

However, we preferred to *broaden* the term 'arts': not only to embrace other 'languages' which are not strictly artistic (though present on the horizon of this issue, such as psychology, ethics, politics, education), but also because it seemed that Ricoeur himself calls for a broadening of the 'symphony' in this direction. We know that he was defined by many, and at various times, «the philosopher of all dialogues»². We know that no form of pre-conceptual knowledge and experience lay beyond his philosophical interests. The passage we quoted earlier

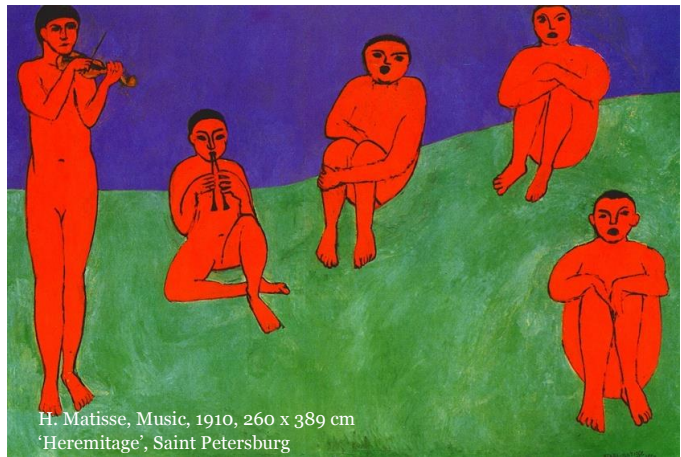
¹ P. Ricoeur, *Arts, Language and Hermeneutic Aesthetics. Interview with Paul Ricoeur. Conducted by Jean-Marie Brohm and Magali Uhl* (September 20, 1996 in Paris), tr. engl. by R.D. Sweeney and J. Carroll: <http://www.philagora.net/philo-fac/ricoeur-e6.php> (Italian translation: P. Ricoeur, *Le arti, il linguaggio e l'estetica-ermeneutica. Intervista a cura di J.-M. Brohm e M. Uhl (Parigi, 20 settembre 1996)*, tr. it. di A. Caputo, in "Logoi", 2015, I, 2, pp. 41-59). I thank the Journal "Philagora" and the *Comité éditorial* of *Fonds Ricoeur* for the permission to translate this Interview.

² See, for example, C. Delacampagne, *Paul Ricoeur, philosophe de tous les dialogues*, "Le Monde", 21-05-2005. See also *Paul Ricoeur, philosophe de tous les dialogues*, Conception et co-auteur avec François Dosse du DVD, film de Caroline Reussner Editions Montparnasse, Paris, 2008. Avec le livret de l'entretien de 1991, *Le tragique et la promesse*.

reminds us why. It is certainly a methodological reason: hermeneutics (philosophy) for Ricoeur, is dialogue; but the dialogue is always with one who is different from myself. Therefore, a philosophy of dialogue is by nature extroverted, moving toward the multiplicity of languages and experiences³.

It is interesting, for us, though, to see how, in the passage quoted in *exergo*, this is not justified methodologically (nor anthropologically nor ontologically), but it is presented symbolically, precisely through the symbol of the symphony. And if it is true (as we were taught by Ricoeur) that «the symbol makes us think» (the symbol is a gift to conceptual thinking)⁴, then here Ricoeur is making a gift to his philosophy, to his understanding. Here Ricoeur is telling us, in some way, between the lines, that his philosophy is a symphony of languages. Therefore, we can understand it in a 'musical' way. Perhaps then, music is not only a limit case amid the arts for Ricoeur, but it is an interpretative key⁵.

What does it mean that Ricoeur's philosophy is a symphony of languages? Echoing his words, it means that it is necessary to consider language all together, just like a *sym/phony*. It means saying that languages are not superordinate to each other, in the same way that people are not either (Ricoeurian ethics). That there is no hierarchy of evaluation, such that we can say that philosophy is 'more' than painting, or music 'more' than literature, or psychoanalysis 'more' than cinema. In this symphony there are qualitative, not truth substantiating, gradations: in the same way that in an orchestra there are different instruments, timbres and voices, but no claims to absoluteness. Ricoeur's philosophy is not one of soloists; in his own life Ricoeur never thought of himself as a soloist: and perhaps this is another reason he was never a 'star', unlike his Parisian colleagues...



Perhaps, he thought of himself more as an orchestra conductor, careful to help the instruments communicate with each other, true to the score of questions: a performer before, and more, than a composer. In this lies his challenge and also his 'novelty': a humble philosophy, a study that always puts the author and the work in the background, to be sure that the reader is at the center; that the reader is the true composer.

However, Ricoeur, of course, remains a philosopher. He is not a musician, painter, writer, scholar of the humanities and/or natural sciences. Yes, in some way, Ricoeur continues to believe in the *logos*, in the power of the word and the concept, a power which, however, is neither absolute nor dominant, but is the power of a service. And the service is, in fact, that of dia-logue, of listening and responding: giving voice to all. «Always remain in

³ See [A. Caputo, Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of the Arts. From the Singularity of the Work of Art to the Singularity of Human Existence.](#) "Logoi", 2015, I, 2, pp. 109-121.

⁴ P. Ricoeur, *Le symbole donne à penser*, in "Esprit", 1959, 27, 7-8, pp. 60-76. In a first English translation, the symbol was qualified as 'food' for thought [*The Symbol: Food for Thought*, in "Philosophy Today", 1960, IV, 3, pp. 196-207], because the symbol 'feeds' reflection without being absorbed into it or absorbing it into itself; but Ricoeur clarifies the meaning of the expression «donne à penser», linking the verb "donner" (to give) with the noun «don» (gift). «Symbol gives rise to thought. This maxim that I find so appealing says two things. The symbol gives: I do not posit the meaning, the symbol gives it; but what it gives is something for thought, something to think about. First the giving, then the positing» [Id., *The Conflict of Interpretation, Essays in Hermeneutics* (D. Ihde eds.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1974, p. 288].

⁵ See [A. Caputo, Paul Ricoeur e la musica come caso-limite nella sinfonia delle arti.](#) "Logoi", 2015, I, 2, pp. 274-285.

language this superiority, that it permits us to speak about music»⁶ and about arts. The arts, indeed, are not meta-reflexive. «Works of art (...) are symbolic devices that cannot produce their own meta-language»⁷. Philosophy in this sense, if no longer meta-physical, is, and remains, for Ricoeur, meta-linguistic. It is the possibility to 'speak', to break the silence, to interpret.

However, what would language (and concept, and philosophy) mean (and say) if there were nothing before it, and out of it? Language can only say what is 'other' from itself. This is where the arts (particularly those devoid of words) are superior to the *logos*.

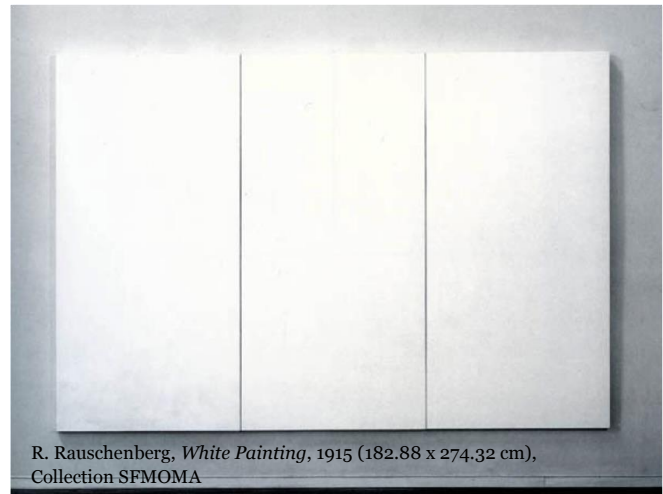
«Music makes us think (*donne à penser*)» – Ricoeur writes in the passage quoted in *exergo*. Once again, he highlights music among the other arts, precisely because it is apparently 'less': less concept, fewer words, less expressiveness, less reference to reality. However, this expression can clearly be extended to all art forms (as you can understand from reading in full the interview cited above).

The arts make one think, they give a gift to conceptual thinking, to philosophy. Philosophy is the recipient, the arts are the donors. However, if – in the logic of the gift – the donor precedes the recipient, then the arts (and, in general, the ante/predicative, pre/conceptual experience) precede philosophy. Or, perhaps better, in the logic of the hermeneutic circle – which in Ricoeur's last writings becomes the circle of the gift – it is a 'mutual' gift, an asymmetrical reciprocity⁸.

The arts give philosophy the gift of experience (singular, radical, emotional, iconic: to think about). Philosophy gives the arts the gift of a possible interpretation. The arts give philosophy the gift of «non-verbal signs», as we have read; but philosophy gives the arts the gift of «verbal signs», verbal meaning. And this different «speaking about» (speaking about the world) becomes «the capacity to be interpreted mutually». They are two «parallel works» (to quote Ricoeur again), two 'parallels' that meet each other at infinity, in the infiniteness of their inexhaustibility.

There would be no art without the possibility/capacity to express moods (and this ability is created with language); but there would be no language without all the fulfillment and feeling that remains unsaid. Paradoxically, at the root of all *logoi*, silence and the ineffable remain. Ricoeur and Heidegger are similar in this. Each 'spoken word' is no more than an attempt to extract a voice from the ineffable. It is a tragic, heartbreaking experience, doomed to failure; yet an amazing experience: like the first word, like the first note, like the first splash of color, like the blank page before the first line of a new novel or the first verse of a new poem.

The symphony of languages, then, is the symphony of the human being, of our infinite diversity, that asks for *phoné* (voice), that asks for *syn-phonia*, that is not resigned to the



⁶ P. Ricoeur, *Arts, Language and Hermeneutic Aesthetics*, cit., <http://www.philagora.net/philo-fac/ricoeur-e6.php>

⁷ See M. Henaff, *La condizione 'spezzata' delle lingue. Ricoeur: diversità umana, alterità e traduzione*, in "Logoi", 2015, I, 2, p. 65.

⁸ I take the liberty of referring to my book A. Caputo, *Io e tu. Una dialettica fragile e spezzata: percorsi con P. Ricoeur*, Stilo, Bari, 2008, pp. 179 sgg.

noise of misunderstanding (*méconnaissance*), to the advance of meaninglessness, to the «défaite croissante du sans prix»⁹.

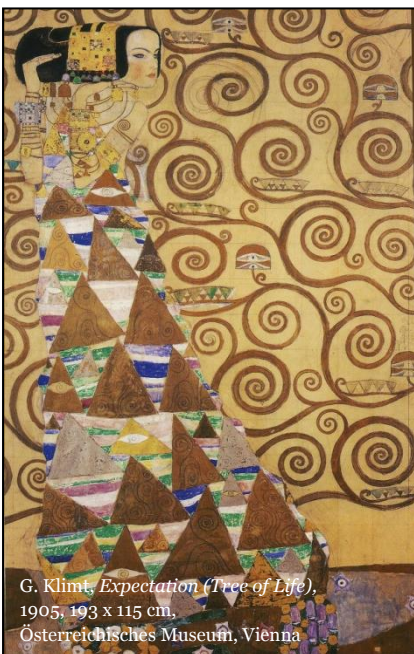
«The desert grows: woe to him who harbors deserts!» – Nietzsche shouts. The fragile *phoné* of the poet and the thinker, of the artist and the musician, of the storyteller and the historian, of the doctor and the teacher is no more than an oasis, replies Ricoeur; it is sometimes a mirage. The fragile word of those who still want to bet on a ‘hope’ (on an alternative possibility) never wins. The story is unpoetic; it is violence; it is conflict¹⁰. The one who opposes is lost. However, the one who does not resist is lost all the same. Creating ‘clearings’ is the resistance of the human in the inhuman; it is the resistance of the arts and philosophy within the logic of mercantilism, of utilitarianism, of nihilism¹¹; it is *syn/phonia*.

And behold, the musical metaphor meets the utopia of the states of peace (which is the message of the last Ricoeur). In the noise of the nothingness that advances, you can only not stop raising your voice (*phone*); and, with the limits and the possibilities of your own language, ‘speak’: say that it is still possible to speak; that dialogue is still possible; that translation is still possible; that the acceptance of a different, foreign language (linguistics and ethical hospitality) is always possible; that betting on the poetic, on the *agape*, on what is right, on forgiveness, on mutuality, is always possible. And this renders us ‘men’, even in defeat. The alternative is not silence (because silence is the hidden source of every ‘possibility’ and ‘wager’); the alternative is a vacuum; it is *a-phonia*.

If this issue of “Logoi” can contribute a bit to support the un/useful and un/timely endurance of the symphony of languages, the work done to put together, in dialogue, different thinkers – with different languages (French, English, Spanish, Italian), from different countries [United States (Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, San Diego), Canada (Ottawa, Brandon, Quebec), Chile (Santiago), France (Paris, Strasbourg, Montpellier), England (Oxford, Glasgow), Portugal (Évora) Spain (Madrid), Germany (Frankfurt), Denmark (Copenhagen), Sweden (Lund), Italy (Rome, Bari, Cagliari, Perugia, Bergamo, Verona, Milan)], with different interests, with different interpretations, with different experiences (ranging from the ‘big’ names of ‘big’ scholars of Ricoeur, to young people who have just received their PhDs) –, the work done to create this issue might not have been completely un/useful and un/timely. And the fact that in just four months a ‘double’ issue with thirty contributions developed, gives us ‘hope’. It gives us the strength to continue.

Mon espoir est dans le langage, l’espoir qu’il y aura toujours des poètes, qu’il y aura toujours des gens pour réfléchir sur eux et des gens pour vouloir politiquement que cette parole, que cette philosophie de la poésie, produise une politique. Là, je dirais que mon pari a la figure de l’espérance

[Paul Ricoeur]¹²



G. Klimt, *Expectation (Tree of Life)*,
1905, 193 x 115 cm,
Österreichisches Museum, Vienna

⁹ P. Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance. Trois études*, Stock, Paris, 2004, p. 343.

¹⁰ Poetics is “a space for hope”, “une onde d’irradiation et d’irrigation qui, de façon secrète et détournée, contribue à l’avancée de l’histoire vers des états de paix”: is the hidden counter-current in the history of violence. See P. Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, cit., p. 354.

¹¹ There are “clearings” in which the “forest” of the “endless struggle for recognition” thins out and becomes a place of “gratitude”: *ivi*, p. 274.

¹² Id., *L’Unique et le Singulier*, Stanké/Alice éditions, Montréal/Bruxelles, 1999, p. 72.