



Poetry is the Form of Mind? Some Considerations on a Recent George Manacorda's Essay

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Giorgio Manacorda's researches led him to affirm that *the poetry is the form of mind*. Delving into his conclusions, one notices that the subject he presents offers to the reader a lot of new, stimulating perspectives of analysis. Thus I wonder what poetry really is, what is the function of the metaphor, and how the new technologies could influence our (metaphorical, i.e. poetic) world view.

1. Analogy

The purpose of this article is to go into some interesting concepts formulated in a recent George Manacorda's essay, *La poesia è la forma della mente*, printed in Italy in 2002. The author's ambitious purpose is to demonstrate that "il cervello produce mente mediante la poesia", or rather, "che proprio non ci sarebbe la mente umana se non ci fosse la poesia"¹. A wording so bold does not allow misunderstandings, so we need to clarify the meaning that Manacorda gives to the word POETRY: poetry is *thought*, and at the same time poetry is *body*; in parallel, we can say that "il modo di pensare che non postula la separazione tra corpo e mente è sopravvissuto in occidente nella poesia"². And that way of thinking is nothing that the analogical thinking, opposite and complementary to the rational-causal, now dominant.

The 'analogy' is therefore essential to poetry, and the analogy has very similar characteristics to those of the metaphor. In fact when I use the macro category (named by the scholars "conceptual metaphor") LIFE IS A JOURNEY I do nothing but combining two seemingly unrelated terms (*metaphor*) to find a hidden similarity (*analogy*) that allows me to illuminate an aspect of the first, through a feature of the second. I would add that creating associations that have a meaning is a human characteristic: a meaning that can be hidden, difficult to interpret, dark as it can be, but never totally arbitrary.

In the passage from brain to mind, from a physical place to a psychical, we create a metaphorical-analogical gap. Manacorda therefore argues that our world understanding, in prehistoric times, was based on analogy, and only gradually was settled on a logical-causal; if

¹ Manacorda 2002, p. 9.

² Manacorda 2002, p. 19.

this is true unquestionably for the geographical and cultural area that we call “the West”, the Asian culture still offers the clearest example of an ‘analogical thinking in progress’, of an endless defense of the poetic reflection mode. Just think of the Zen Buddhism, which in its most extreme current (the Rinzai school, otherwise known as “school of the sudden change”) leads the student to understand the reality not through the mediation of logic reasoning, but due to a sudden intuitive “shock” (no coincidence that the achievement of the last stage of the process is called *Enlightenment*). It is significant, moreover, that great scholars like Douglas Hofstadter and Fritjof Capra have tried successfully to show deep similarities that exist between this practice and the (apparently) more ‘scientific’, ‘rational’ models of Western thought, from Gödel’s theorem³ to the modern testing in a laboratory to subatomic physics⁴.

In contrast in Europe and U.S.—that as we have just said have supplanted the original *forma mentis* for the logic benefit—the vestiges of primitive thought can be traced today, according to Manacorda, precisely in those (seldom) modes of thought approach based on analogical, i.e. metaphorical, combination. Therefore, if these procedures have their greatest accomplishment in the poetic analogy, he derives (precisely because of a logic inference!) that the mind produces meaning through poetry.

This assumption agrees well with the thought of a great German scholar, Aby Warburg. Art historian, born in Hamburg in the second half of the nineteenth century, he is best remembered for a book with very original and innovative characters: *Mnemosyne. The Atlas of Memory*, just reissued in Italy in 2002, the same year in which was given to the press *La poesia è la forma della mente*.

This work, which led Warburg’s researches for nearly three decades, was published—incomplete—only after the death of the German scholar, on 26 October 1929. *Mnemosyne*, defined by its author as “un sistema estendibile di attaccapanni sul quale spero di appendere tutti i panni, piccoli e grandi, prodotti dal telaio del Tempo”⁵, consisted of a series of panels (the “attaccapanni”) on which were placed images (the “panni”) apparently unrelated, which actually concealed a simultaneous connection to deeper levels of meaning. The first table, for example, through the juxtaposition of a seventeenth-century description of the sky, a map of Europe and the family tree of the Medici and Tornabuoni Families, showed the “diversi sistemi di relazioni, alle quali l’uomo è vincolato: cosmiche, terrestri, genealogiche” and the resulting “amalgama di queste relazioni nel pensiero magico”⁶.

Warburg’s mind worked in harmony with the poetic mind postulated by Manacorda: not by logical inferences, but for analogical associations, not through diachronic causal relationships, but for synchronic cognitive shortcuts. The poem, an ancient form of thought, thrown out the door of Mind reenters through a window left open from one of the sharpest men the last century has given to us.

³ Hofstadter 1979, chapter IX

⁴ Capra 1975, chapter II.

⁵ Extract of a Warburg’s letter to his friend Jacques Mesnil; quoted in Warburg 2002, p. VIII.

⁶ Warburg 2002, p. 8.

2. Smith Art

"El héroe mató al hijo de Mak; | Hubo tempestad de espadas y alimento de cuervos"⁷. With these words, Borges opens his story *Las kenningar*, inserted in the collection *Historia de la eternidad*. At the initial aesthetic pleasure of finding oneself dealing with innovative metaphors, succeeds early in the reader the disappointment for recognition of stereotypes, that remain the same during the saga and in the most of the medieval Icelandic literature: the *kenningar*, exactly. The process was not new: already in *Beowulf* the sea (for example) was defined with circumlocutions like as *the path of the sails*, *the cup of the waves* and similar; and further back in time we can recall the ships of the *Iliad*, *crossing of the sea*. If anything, the novelty would be precisely in the final crystallization that around the year thousand, in Iceland, is implemented: the primitive matching (original, and thus bearer of meaning) of two terms disjoint that, melting, gave rise to the metaphor, stiffens into patterns always identical, which give rise to trivial isomorphisms, catalogs of synonyms that have now lost all their poetical potential.

How can we define, then, the metaphor? An extensive scientific literature⁸ has now conclusively demonstrated that it is, even before that mere aesthetic artifice (later degenerated into banal *kenningar*), a clever mental trick created by men to bring in few simple cognitive categories the infinite variety of the world. In the previous metaphor, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, the less well-known term (LIFE, the 'vehicle') is enriched by juxtaposition with the more familiar term (JOURNEY, the 'tenor'), so that one or more characteristics of the second are intuitively transmitted to the first. The short circuit resulting from contact between two lexemes, rather than melting the two (as would happen in a fairly modern computer), allows us to expand our knowledge of the universe revealing, within these entities, characteristics ignored until now.

The poet, therefore, helps us to discover the world. But if, as we just said, the whole universe is so vast and varied that it can be considered as an infinite reservoir of knowledge, then the poet, *selecting* for us the knowable truths from the unknowable, stands as a real *creator* of knowledge. He shapes our world at his will, deciding which and how many analogical connections may from time to time be set apart, deciding if and when the time comes for the man (the reader), to amend, for example, its vision of life, adding to it new inputs resulting from the combination with a journey. With the Foucault's words it can be said that "le poète est celui qui, au-dessous des différences nommées et quotidiennement prévues, retrouve les parentés enfouies des choses, leurs similitudes dispersées"⁹

And if then (especially for the medieval man so steeped in Christianity) is valid the assertion that *in principio creavit Deus caelum et terram*, figuratively reasoning the equivalent of God, here, among the men, will be precisely the bard, the poet, hermetic but reliable vehicle of the highest truths of heaven. Collecting a suggestion of Hans Robert Jauss — difficult to justify from a purely philological point of view, but seductive if seen in an less rigid optical — one of the most famous poems of Guilhem IX points out this succession, resting on the hinge of *creatio ex nihilo*, between the sacred and the profane. The Count of Poitiers began his poem with these words:

⁷ Borges 1971, p. 47.

⁸ At the pioneer Brooke-Rose 1958 we can add Ricoeur (1975) 1977, Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Lakoff and Turner 1989, Goatly 1997; a bibliographical synthesis is in Stockwell 2002.

⁹ Foucault (1966) 1990, p. 63.

Farai un vers de dreit nien,
Non er de mi ni d'otra gen,
Non er d'amor ni de joven
Ni de ren au,
Qu'enans fo trobatz en durmen
Sus un chivau.

I'll do a song about nothing at all;
It won't be about me nor about others,
It won't be about love nor about happiness
Nor about anything else,
For it was composed earlier while (I was) sleeping
On a horse¹⁰.

By changing the meaning of this initial 'de' (the grammar does not preclude this interpretation), the *vers de dreit nien* would be so, according to Jauss, not a poem *about* pure nothingness, but a poem [created] *from* pure nothingness¹¹.

What is, besides, the work accomplished by Dante Alighieri, he as well a prophet and poet, indeed the poet-prophet par excellence, if not a new literary creation? He invents a place and a time, considers it from the point of view of God, and puts in his personal universe the mankind; but that universe, far from being a pale copy of this world, is its *unveiling of the figure*, truer than what, here, we call true. Dante judges the souls, and places them in their cosmic location: in a nutshell Dante becomes God, and makes it by poetry¹². In the way of Frances A. Yates's insight, then developed by Harald Weinrich, that the deep structure of the Comedy is bound at the medieval arts of memory, Antonelli recently stated that

Se l'organizzazione della materia, la sua gerarchia e organizzazione dovevano rappresentare uno straordinario *itinerarium mentis in Deum*, occorreva che l'autore stesso si autorappresentasse nei fatti come un legislatore della memoria e della parola, visto che si era attribuito il ruolo di giudice che "giudica e manda secondo ch'avvinghia", come Minosse, e non solo nell'*Inferno*. Dunque come Dio, a cui più volte si era figuramente e analogicamente accostato, in quanto creatore di scrittura, di un "poema sacro" che aveva lo stesso significato polisemico della Bibbia¹³.

But what was poetry for Dante? Smith art. Is known the passage of *Purgatorio* XXVI where, after having recognized Guinizzelli as his spiritual father, the Florentine is invited by him to look in another direction, toward the man who—according to Guido, but with the consent of Dante *auctor*—"fu miglior fabbro del parlar materno": the troubadour Arnaut Daniel¹⁴. The exegesis of this verse, with the many hermeneutical problems that is still continuing below, cannot leave out a fact of capital importance: Arnaut, that in Dante's creation is hypostasis of poetry, is

¹⁰ Ed. Eusebi (1995) 2006, p. 35. English translation in Bond 1982.

¹¹ Jauss 1977, p. 81. It is maybe not casual that the chapter from which this quotation is taken is titled "*Poiesis: die produktive Seite der ästhetischen Erfahrung*".

¹² Cf. Barolini 1992, p. 14, when he says that Dante "is crafting the word of God in language".

¹³ Antonelli 2003, p. 43.

¹⁴ *Purgatorio* XXVI, 117. And cf. also the epigraph at the very known poem *The Waste Land*: "For Ezra Pound: *il miglior fabbro*".

blacksmith. Poetry is thus, first of all, *labor limae*, patient art of polishing the lines. Yeats, several centuries later, will say:

A line will take us hours maybe;
yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
our stitching and unstitching has been naught¹⁵.

The smith metaphor, after all, had found one of its leading exponents in the same Arnaut, as Paolo Canettieri suggests in an essay in which the “creative” component is constantly brought into relation with the “funny” one, being the two elements so thickly interchangeable that the inspiration to discern where one ends and where another begins is permanently frustrated: “Il ‘fare’, implicito nello stesso concetto di *poiesis*, viene talvolta a coincidere coscientemente nell’arte dei trovatori con il ‘giocare’, poiché il poeta non è solo creatore dal nulla, come Dio, ma ha anche il laicissimo compito di dilettere il proprio uditorio”¹⁶.

If previously we concluded that “the mind produces *meaning* through poetry”, we can now, at this inference, juxtapose another of equal importance: the mind produces *the world* through poetry.

It remains questionable whether this creation is static, or whether it unfolds endlessly in the progressive becoming of time.

3. Variation and Innovation

The question is mostly obvious: if creation was static, this would mean that there was, in a remote time, a single poet who, like the God of Genesis, lyrically shaped the world in which we live today. Of course it did not happen, and then we just have to accept the second possibility: the creation is incessant, fluid, and dynamic. Since metaphors are a reservoir of infinite knowledge, we can say without the slightest hesitation that poets have always existed and always will be. More interesting, at this point, it would be to investigate *how* poetry, from time to time, creates the world, and how—while remaining always similar to itself—it keeps changing imperceptibly.

Similarity and difference, change and innovation. We are entering in a new microcosm dense of semantic implications, which is present in Manacorda’s essay too. At pages 32-37 he analyzes Hofmannsthal’s literary (almost existential) turn that, in 1900, let him to abandon the *theme* to devote himself entirely to the development of *variation* (of topics of others), in order to restore a sense that seemed permanently compromised. Hofmannsthal’s recovery of classical theater, therefore, “non ha nulla a che vedere con procedimenti di attualizzazione. Non si trattava di

¹⁵ W. B. Yeats, *Adam’s curse*, vv. 4-6. The blacksmith, in the popular tradition, was a magical and enigmatic character: cf. Cardini, when he speaks about the “atteggiamento di rispetto-paura-diffidenza nei confronti di categorie di persone quali i fabbri, sorta di artefici-stregoni isolati, che vivevano ai margini dei boschi e delle carboniere, che dominavano le forze terribili e arcane del ferro e del fuoco, che stavano in contatto continuo con le viscere della madre terra e che nel forgiare le armi – strumento di morte – mormoravano ancora gli antichi carmina”. Cf. Cardini 1979, p. 18.

¹⁶ Canettieri 1996, p. 193.

rendere attuale, ma di riscoprire. Egli non vuole “aggiornare” qualcosa che è sentito come passato, ma fare i conti con l’eterna presenza dell’immaginario occidentale. Con i suoi contenuti, non con le sue forme”¹⁷.

Experiment important, but not alone nor innovative in the history of European culture; seven centuries before Hofmannsthal, something similar had been tried not by an individual, but from a whole literary society. Once again we must build a bridge between us and the troubadours.

“Il tema è soltanto un pretesto; è l’opera formale in se stessa che costituisce il soggetto”. This sentence—completely in tune with Hofmannsthal’s thought—was actually written more than a century ago about the singers of courtly love¹⁸. Their ideas of Beauty, like those of all the medieval, from Augustine to Dante, was as far as imaginable from the modern aesthetical conception. If today dominates the concept of *originality*, and therefore a work has some value as long as it is innovative (it is enough to point out to what extent this way of thinking has led, especially in the field of fine arts), about a millennium ago the *condicio sine qua non* a genius creation was generally accepted within the cultural landscape was certainly its close adherence to the canon, or, to use a term dear to the medievals, to existing *auctoritates*. Nothing could be written, painted or just thought that was not attributable to the formula: *I fully agree with x, but I might add y*. Variation *was* innovation.

Such way of thinking, if originally prerogative of *content* only, was soon struck by the history of *forms*. The troubadours, in the guise of knights-errant all together in search¹⁹ of their personal Graal (i.e. the perfect interpenetration of signifier and signified, music and language, *motz* and so) perhaps aspired to find that universal *Stimmung* so subtly analyzed by Leo Spitzer in some very dense articles²⁰. Precisely in their perennial artistic search, by its very nature destined to remain unsatisfied, they saw their ultimate goal in making poetry. What really mattered was not so much the result to be achieved as the way forward, which was necessary to undertake a constant refinement²¹ in order not to fall into *stagnation*, condition that would produce (basically what is actually happened) a radical demolition of that whole cultural system based on a so precarious balance. Again Jauss, after saying

Come tra la cosmologia medievale e la biologia moderna c’è la trasformazione di un modello devoluzionistico del mondo in un modello evoluzionistico (nel quale l’inizio ha perso il primato ontologico su ciò che si è formato da esso), così anche tra la concezione medioevale e quella moderna della *poiesis* artistica c’è il passaggio da un sapere (*Können*) che

¹⁷ Manacorda 2002, p. 34.

¹⁸ Guiette (1949), 1990, p. 140.

¹⁹ The same etymology of their name was often connected with the latin *INVENIRE*, in its duplex meaning: *to find*, but also *to invent, to create*.

²⁰ Then edited in Spitzer 1963.

²¹ It is no accident if Dante ends the chant dedicated to Arnaut Daniel with the enigmatic line: “Poi s’ascose nel foco che li *affina*”.

viene dopo il perfetto come modello da imitare, ad una attività creatrice che produce essa stessa il perfetto (o in altre parole: la bella apparenza della perfezione)²²,

adds, quoting Lewis, a fundamental fact: in the Middle Ages we find the only exception to the rule, the only escape from the devolutionary scheme, right in the lyrical *creatio ex nihilo* of the troubadours that, in contrast to the tendency of its time, tends to an inexorable progress (because of its starting from a state of imperfection).

Poetry, through which mind creates the meaning, and through which mind produces the world, always travels in one direction (even when the history of thought seems to follow the opposite path): in the direction of an improvement obtained, as Darwin teaches, not because of sudden and accidental evolutionary leaps, but tile by tile, for subsequent layers of adaptive mutations that, in our case, are nothing but metaphors equipped of meaning, analogies (poems) by which our knowledge of the creation becomes richer.

4. Wikipedia

Why, then, human beings decided to abandon their original cognitive mode to take the uncertain path of rational thinking? Manacorda suggests that it was the metaphysics—"il gesto che separa"²³—to pave the way to the logic mode; the result was not the overcoming of death wished by metaphysics, but a double negative effect: opening a philosophical chasm, deeper than the one intended to fill, and preventing at the same time all of mankind from coping with it, inhibiting any use of the most congenial cognitive mode, the *analogy*.

The break of this deadlock is traced to a review of Heidegger's writings. Reviewing briefly the dense conclusions reached by Manacorda, one can say that in "Being and Time" (the work in which is theorized the *Sein Zum Tode*) specific emphasis is given to emotional thought, at the expense of the logical one. A few years later, in a letter to his friend Max Kommerell about one of the essays on Hölderlin, Heidegger seems to be incubating the prospect of a new philosophy, in which the sense will be born no longer by rational thought, but from the poetic word. The conclusion to which the philosopher comes (and Manacorda derives not a gash between the two views, but a continuity of opinion) is that it is "il pensiero poetico [...] che fonda il senso"²⁴ as, in the same way, the ritual sacrifice lays the foundations for the symbolic order of the world²⁵.

Heidegger's letter to Kommerell shows the way to bring to an end this mental atrophy, but the road is still long and uphill. Once identified in the *restoration of poetic thought* the medicine needed to cure the modern disease (the *absolute rationality*) of the West, it is necessary, so to

²²Jauss 1987, I, p. 128. In the original language: "Wie zwischen der mittelalterlichen Kosmologie und der neuzeitlichen Biologie der Wandel von einem devolutionären zu einem evolutionären Weltmodell liegt (wo das Anfängliche seine ontologischen Vorrang über das aus ihm Hervorgegangene eingebüßt hat), so liegt dann auch zwischen dem mittelalterlichen und dem neuzeitlichen Verständnis von künstlerischer Poiesis der Wandel von einem Können, dem das Vollkommene als nachzuahmendes Muster vorausliegt, zu einer Schöpfung, die das Vollkommene (oder anders gesagt: den schönen Schein der Vollendung) selbst hervorbringt". Cf. Jauss 1977, p. 82.

²³ Manacorda 2002, p. 76.

²⁴ Manacorda 2002, p. 73.

²⁵ The reader can find interesting connections between Heesterman 1993 and Manacorda's essay.

speak, to prescribe the right dosage, or rather, to find the proper care. And Manacorda sees in psychoanalysis, “pensiero emotivo in atto”²⁶, the only real option for overcoming our present condition.

In fact, in an earlier chapter (“Della tecnica. *Verschmelzung* nel soft”) Manacorda had identified another possible remedy. Indeed, he found himself at odds with the bipartite vision of the organization forms of the Western text proposed by Antonucci: between the plain linearity of reading (i.e. in a novel) and the total lack of organization of an Encyclopedia-dictionary (where you can skip at will from one node to another, e.g. from a definition to another) there is—states Manacorda—the *poetic mode*, which allows both possibilities. And the poetic mode—this is the central point—is restored with the emergence of new media.

This insight is then by-directionally deepened. Indeed, insisting more on the fact that “la poesia è una modalità ipermediale del pensiero” because it uses the language “in un modo intrinsecamente diverso dall’uso lineare”, Manacorda states briefly the equally important inference that “la multimedialità non fa altro che riscoprire, e applicare per via tecnologica, il modo di procedere della poesia”²⁷. And it is this change of perspective that can, in my view, lead us quite far.

We said that, for mankind, it is necessary to redeem the lost analogy. I think that, from the textual forms of organization that new technologies make available, we could reach this fundamental recovery. Halfway between the novel and the Enciclopedia-dictionary—more even than poetry—arises Wikipedia. With Wikipedia, the text is *linear* as long as you want; when you encounter a node that arouses your interest, the source text—in part or not—is abandoned, heading to other shores. With Wikipedia the text is *metaphorical* as you want: the reader, no longer passive—as it was in the novel, as well as in poetry, where the creative task was reserved to the author—, can continually find fertile analogical images that amplify his vision of the world. With Wikipedia (that is only the most representative among the contemporary trends making possible to cross the text with hyperlinks) it will be finally possible, if we want, to mend the breach opened by the metaphysical momentary dominance of logical thinking; it will be possible—if we will be able to be forward-looking, like the troubadours, pointing more to the way than to the goal to be achieved—to implement a *new form of poetry*, in which author and reader, as in a Molièrian comedy, will exchange their clothes so fast to make it impossible to discern where one ends and where another begins.

²⁶ Manacorda 2002, p. 105.

²⁷ Manacorda 2002, p. 99.

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