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SEMIOTICS OF THE METAPHOR AS USED BY ARISTOTLE

all'eí per êstin en brotoís pseudegoreîn
pithaná, nomízein chrê se heí tounantion
âpist' alethê pollá symbainein brotoís

Euripides

Though the description of the metaphor as used by Aristotle appears at times uncertain and contradictory and at times unobtrusive, it forms in our opinion the centre of a vast problem particularly useful for semiotic study today.

The position Aristotle gives the metaphorical statement is, in fact, that of a nucleus construction of likelihood, the metaphysical foundation of which is the plain possibility (dynatón), contradictory from within and therefore with no aptitude as regards the cognitive approach of an epistemological kind; thereby, the reason why Aristotle limits, almost exclusively, the expression of his conception of a metaphor to *Rhetorics* and *Poetics* appears fully justifiable and, in such a way, forms one of the links between the two branches of knowledge and a trace of their identical origin.

The apparent contradiction which the reader notices at the presentation of the metaphor, both in *Rhetorics* and *Poetics*, is that of the preliminary assertion which defines clearness (saphêneia), the proper virtue of elocution: "...and we, hereby, define that the virtue of elocution is clearness. A proof of this is the fact that if speech does not clearly express itself it does not serve its purpose." (*Rhet.* III, 1404b, 1-2); two contrasting assertions immediately ring back: "Furthermore the metaphor chiefly withholds clearness..." (*Ibid.* III, 1405a, 8-9) and: "...all that is expressed metaphorically is, in fact, obscure." (*Top.* VI, 139b, 34-35; the text of *Topics* says in a more explicit way what is ascertained by *Poetics* XXII, 1458a, 18-23 and we have therefore preferred it), because they withhold, on the one hand, that it is clearness which characterizes a metaphor, and on the other hand, that it is its absolute obscurity.

The way to clarify this problem is to focus the meaning that Aristotle gives to the term *clearness* as regards the metaphorical statement which we have

defined as *enigmatic-mimetic*; the complex identity of the metaphor can be therein identified, and it emerges from the common ground of poetic and of prosaic expressions, appropriating the *têlos* to the particular rhetorics, that is, that of giving the means of inducing the listener - user of the work of art to accept intellectually and emotionally - the thesis and the facts described above. To do this, expression of a scientific kind can be of no use, even though it were founded on the most certain truth (*Rhet.* I, 1355a, 25-30).

The most common and obvious meaning given to the word *clearness* in current language as well as in that used by Aristotle is "...to state things as they are" and this is also the first meaning of *saphêneia* which Aristotle gives to the metaphorical expression; that which appears less evident, however, is the conviction that such *clearness* can be reached by the metaphorical statement inasmuch as it is *enigmatic*, where "...the idea of enigma is exactly that of putting together absurdities by saying the *real things* (*ta hypârchonta*)" (*Poet.* XXII, 1458a, 26-27). Let us, therefore, linger on this passage of *Poetics* which is particularly enlightening for our study, by beginning to focus the key-term (*hypârchon*) already introduced.

In linguistic semiotics used by Aristotle the rule of reference of the triadic process relating to the *lôgos apophantikôs*, which is the primary data and fundament of other expressive *schēma* (see A. Pagliaro, *Il capitolo linguistico della Poetica di Aristotele*, in "Ricerche linguistiche", III, 1954, page 45) characterises, therefore, the reality of the object by which one "...ascertains or denies anything" (*lôgos apophantikôs*), a reality devoid of casualness and the binding materiality which would rather characterize the *tynchânôn*, ontologically, however, much more alive than the *prâgma* to which the ordinary designation of the *ônoma* refers; the vague nature of the *ônoma* finds a determination only through the contextual operation obtained by the *apôphansis* on the semantic and logical ground.

Now, if the reality to which the metaphorical expression refers is in itself *hypârchon*, it will be necessary to suppose from within an operation of the same kind as that of the essential *lôgos* itself; by that, a break occurs in the traditional rhetorical conceptions of the metaphor as a simple substitution, and this fracture allows the theory of the metaphor, as used by Aristotle, to come closer to the more modern formulations of the same problem.

The expressions by Aristotle as regards this, even if they do not explicitly express his thoughts, are sufficient, however, to allow us to overcome the simple interpretation which claims to place the metaphor side by side with any other *ónoma*, so that it would be sufficient to return the term that has been substituted, to understand it, thus obtaining an exhaustive paraphrase of the said metaphor.

In fact, Aristotle often speaks about the metaphorical use of words, about metaphorical expressions, about linguistic structures obtained through the metaphor (see *Rhet.* III, 1410b, 31-32; *Poet.* XXII, 1459a, 6; *Ivi* XXII, 1458a, 10-12) for which it is impossible to substitute ordinary corresponding words (see *Ibid.* XXII, 1458b, 17-20) without undergoing, as a consequence, not only a lack of elegance of expression (rhetorical dimension) as in the case of the *glōssai*, but even the loss of a particular determination that only the metaphorical statement can confer upon the words with which it is composed (semantic dimension).

Accordingly, the *topos* of the metaphor does not lie so much in the words by which it is expressed; it lies more in the process which metaphorizes the whole number of words used for a given expression. The epiphenomenon of such a process is the *enérgeia*, the capacity of giving vigour to the expression which is not, however, in itself unequivocally indicative of the metaphor. It is, in fact, the final results of both fundamental functions of rhetorical syntax: metaphor and antithesis; here, Aristotle determines the characteristic traits in the case of a metaphorical statement, underlining the fact that it must succeed in "making the action stand out clear before you"; "to stand out clear" means the effect produced by the words which present things in the actualization (*energoúnta semáinei*) (see *Rhet.* III, 1411b, 22-26).

This is the *topos* of the metaphor, the determination of a new meaning which passes through it from *dynatón* to *enérgeia*, from potency to actuality, from the undetermined possibility to the reality of the likelihood. But, by this, we are definitely placed in the order of the *ermeneía* of which the onomastic significance is but the lowest step, similar to "what is being thought without unit or separation" (*De Int.* I, 16a, 13-14).

The metaphor addresses its creativity to a deep meaning, the ontological intensity of which has been completely overshadowed by common sense, which is

an expression of an ordinary designation, turning common sense itself upside down and, therefore, rendering itself enigmatic. According to Aristotle, this procedure is not from sign to meaning, like that of ordinary statements, even having in common with them the characteristics of referring to the being of the reality described. In these, in fact, the apôphansis *symbolizes* a psychological connection (dôxa) without there being any adjacency between one and the other, but in the most rigorous respect of an absolute *convention*; in the metaphorical designation a semantic upheaval occurs (*trêpesthai* → *trôpos*) which establishes an indexical relationship between one meaning and another ("...to use a metaphor correctly means to perceive the close conception through the mind" *Poet.* XXII, 1459a, 7-8; "...metaphors...are always in relationship to two conceptions" *Rhet.* III, 1412b, 35-36). They are essentially tied one to the other ("...the metaphor identifies the two terms" *Ibid.* III, 1410b, 18-19) in an analogical relationship ("...it is typical of the metaphor to pick out the analogy even among things that are very different" *Ibid.* III, 1412a, 11-13; "...it is necessary that the metaphores be appropriate: this is obtained through the proportion" *Ibid.* III, 1405a, 10-11); through it, one can express the enêrgeia of a dynatôn: "...and this, in a structure made up by normal terms, is not possible, but it can be obtained through the metaphor." (*Poet.* XXII, 1458a, 29-30).

In the pages by Aristotle the analogical relationship is figured out as being the right middle of the metaphorical trope, and it discovers the ambit not only of success but of the actual existence of the metaphorical expression.

There are, in fact, two extremes into which the metaphor could disappear, dampening its expressive capacity; many times Aristotle puts the reader on guard against these: "...another attraction lies in the words which possess a metaphor, if it is not taken at a distance, because in that case it doesn't even attract our attention" (*Rhet.* III, 1410b, 31-34); "...when the metaphor gives a name to things that have no name, it mustn't do so taking it from a distance" (*Ibid.* III, 1405a, 36); "...one must obtain a metaphor...from things that are similar in kind but haven't at the same time an obvious likeness" (*Ibid.* III, 1402a, 11-12).

If, in fact, the metaphor identifies two conceptions, the likeness of which is obvious, it would be rather a similitude because the mind would be induced in "not examining the relationship" between the two meanings in which

the formation of the sense of the metaphor is taking place, but one would become "the explanation" of the other (see *Ibid.* III, 1410b, 17-20; *Ivi* III, 1407a, 14-15). The metaphorical trope would lose effect by not complying with its function of producing the accomplishment of an original reality, and the image we would obtain would only have the function of "exemplum fictum" of common sense.

The opposite behaviour of a metaphorical expression which is to identify conceptions that are completely strange to one another would transform the metaphor into a hieroglyphic sign of which the mind, not being capable of examining the relationship and having mastered the bewilderment of the obscurity of the expression (see *Ibid.* III, 1406b, 8), could only try to give an interpretation through a mere extrinsic parallelism with the original designation, in the way in which the stone of Rosetta presents a hieroglyphic and an alphabetical text, with a consequential loss of the specificity of the metaphor. The enigma of the metaphor must, therefore, be controlled by the equilibrium of the analogy in order to adequately answer to its need of clearness (see *Ibid.* III, 1405a, 8-9) which we have already mentioned at the beginning of this article. It must, however, remain an enigmatic clearness chipped off the common sense symbolized by a structure of *kýria onómata kai rêmata*, and noble expression of the creative capacity of the human mind (see *Poet.* XXII, 1459a, 10-14), absolutely unreducible to the aseptic clearness of the ordinary language, before which it always appears absolutely *asaphês* (see *Top.* VI, 139b, 32-35).

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle presents the nature of the metaphor more clearly by indicating it as one of the elements which is more adaptable to *diegematikê mîmesis*, inasmuch as it contributes to the "bodying" (*perittê*) of such an expression (see *Poet.* XXIV, 1459b, 34-37). A paradigmatic element from the world of likelihood, of which Aristotle's *Rhetorics* is an attentive philosophical analysis, the metaphor changes from the subject of *Poetics* the creativity which characterizes it; in fact, its absolute inadequacy for expressions of the scientific kind, its efficiency in giving life to a "becoming" which takes place "before one's eyes" (the listener's eyes) (see *Rhet.* III, 1410b, 34-35) thus producing a kind of knowledge which is different to the epistemological one and yet always real (see *Ibid.* III, 1410b, 13) immediately recalls the conception of the *mîmesis* which recurs in the pages of *Poetics* by Aristotle. It is just that mimetic metaphor that creates the

conditions of indexicality of the tie which unites the two meanings that form the expression, because one is set in a creative world in which the ties of the data of reality are reduced to the minimum and are in any case insignificant, to favour the direct approach to a less superficial stage of the being at which one neither arrives symbolically nor by means of the images and as total strangers to the context in which they are placed. Moreover, the metaphor leaves the mimesis which is its particularity, to assume symbolic or iconic traits, the more it comes out of itself, and Aristotle enumerates various degenerations of the metaphor, such as the similitude, which we have already mentioned, the proverb (see *Ibid.* III, 141a, 17-20), the hyperbole (see *Ivi* III, 1413a, 21-26), the riddles (see *Ivi* III, 1405b, 4), which though they are structurally so close to the metaphor that they are taken for one in the common language (Aristotle himself calls them "metaphors" or "types of metaphors"), do not have, however, the one and only nature of the metaphorical statement, which alone renders it unrepeatable (see *Poet.* XXII, 1459a, 5-8).

The analysis of the metaphor by Aristotle, however, does not end here. It is full of further interesting developments, particularly in the logical functional field; in such an ambit, in fact, the problem of the analogy of the metaphorical expression and its possibility of being reduced to a syllogism is placed. Our further study will deal with them.

NOTE

The presupposition of this study are, on the one hand, Max Bense's semiotics, particularly as regards the relationship between icon und index (see *Die Unwahrscheinlichkeit des Ästhetischen*, Baden-Baden 1979), on the other hand Armando Plebe's *Studi sulla retorica stoica* (Torino 1968), particularly as regards the relationship between metaphor and clearness.

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Internationale Zeitschrift
für Semiotik und Ästhetik
6. Jahrgang, Heft 2, 1981

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