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THE REHABILITATION OF RHETORICAL HUMANISM REGARDING HEIDEGGER'S ANTI-HUMANISM

1. THE PROBLEM OF HUMANISM

Heidegger's affirmation is categorical: "... the thinking expressed in *Being and Time* is against humanism".¹ Heidegger's thesis is not only categorical, it is also polemical. He maintains that the humanist conception does not grasp man's essence, and it is for this reason that he is opposed to humanism, which is a doctrine

Translated by R. Scott Walker

¹ M. Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus*, in *Platon, Lehrer der Wahrheit*, Berne, 1949, p. 62.

that “has not thought profoundly enough of man’s *humanitas*.”²

The question that I propose to deal with, however, goes beyond a discussion of Heidegger; it confronts us with important historical and theoretical problems. What is the conception of humanism to which Heidegger refers and against which he rails? Is this conception historically valid? Or should the historiographical schema he presupposes be reconsidered and discussed? Did Heidegger have direct knowledge of humanist sources and texts?

Moreover, Heidegger sees in humanism a variant of the traditional metaphysics that he clearly rejects. The discussion of his anti-humanism, therefore, also implies the question of knowing whether humanism, in its philosophical significance, is part of traditional metaphysics.

The essence of the humanist tradition, which appeared in the Renaissance with its original and quite new contribution, is to no longer take as point of departure the problem of beings (as does traditional philosophy). The originality of the humanists was to begin with the problem of the word and of the reevaluation, from the philosophical point of view, of poetry and rhetoric, to which traditional metaphysics had denied any speculative role.

The intelligence of the humanist tradition is thus intimately linked not only to the discussion of the validity of the traditional historical schema applied to humanism, but also to the question of the philosophical role of poetry and rhetoric. The problems that Heidegger raised—humanism, the validity of our traditional evaluation of it, and the discussion of traditional metaphysics—are in fact intimately related.

And here it is important to recall one fact. Heidegger was not the only one to deny any philosophical importance to humanism. At the very dawn of modern thought, Descartes, for example, excluded humanist disciplines (philology, history, poetry, rhetoric) from the philosophical domain affirming that they made no contribution to a clarification of speculative thinking and that they in fact obscured it.³

² *Idem*, p. 75.

³ Descartes, *Regulae ad directionem ingenii, regula III*, in *Oeuvres*, published by G. Adams and P. Tannery, Paris, Vrin 1947; *Discours de la méthode, idem*, vol. VI, I. 9.

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As for post-Cartesian philosophy, the judgment brought to bear on the slight philosophical importance of humanism is just as negative as in Descartes. Hegel defines philosophy as systematic thinking, *rational*, that succeeds in grasping the essence of the real only by means of the dialectical process, logic; consequently “the systems must be *freed* of their external forms and of any reference to the particular in order to attain the *Idea* in its pure conceptuality”.⁴

Philosophy, identified with rational science, only acquires its own specific form when it is raised to the level of the *Idea*, whereas humanism stops in the realm of fantasy, of art (inadequate forms for expressing the *Idea* according to Hegel). Truth plays a secondary role in humanism, while the figurative and metaphorical element is brought to the fore. Truth is not manifested as such, and “the content is the image, which is always something natural”.⁵ Humanist thinking, according to Hegel, is merely a superficial phenomenon “in which philosophy can find no profit”.⁶

This negative opinion can also be found among historians, Mommsen, for example, who saw the roots of the humanist tradition in the thinking of Cicero, to whom he denies any philosophical originality.⁷ Ernst Cassirer likewise affirms that in humanism, where philology and philosophy are combined, “there is no true innovation in method”.⁸ Concerned with finding in the humanist tradition what constitutes for him one of the essential problems of philosophy—the problem of knowledge—Cassirer concludes that he was able to find only minute traces of this fundamental preoccupation.

Today such a scholar as Karl O. Apel upholds the thesis that humanists in their discussions with scholastic logic “use an extremely weak philosophical apparatus, substituting pathetic assertions for rational arguments”.⁹

⁴ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Stuttgart, Ed. Glockner 1938, vol. XVII, p. 59.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 127.

⁶ *Idem*, p. 149.

⁷ T. Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, III, Berlin, 1933, p. 619.

⁸ E. Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*, Leipzig, Teubner 1927, p. 11.

⁹ K.O. Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie I: Sprachanalytik, Semiotik, Hermeneutik*, Frankfurt, 1973, p. 154.

Similarly Werner Jaeger finds no speculative value in humanism. He states that it is only the expression of a particular cultural ideal whose purpose is the education of man, and this ideal did not even succeed in forming a synthesis of the greatest conceptions realized for the first time by Greek and Roman philosophy nor in its general project of *paideia*.¹⁰

The traditional but still valid historical schema relative to humanist philosophy could be summarized in this manner. In humanism can be observed a revaluation of the immanent values of man (compared to medieval thought), a revaluation consequently of history, philology, of the Greek and Roman world (Burckhardt's thesis, amplified and ratified by Croce and Gentile); another thesis considered humanism, in its theoretical specificity, to be the Christian revaluation of Platonic and neoplatonic thinking; the leaders of this current were Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Diacceto. P.O. Kristeller is the best representative of this indulgent thesis. E. Garin produced an apologetic synthesis of both conceptions in his works.

It is evident that Heidegger based his anti-humanist position on the presumed validity of this historical schema; the few notes that follow will confirm this. In his *Letter on Humanism* written to Jean Beaufret (which I published for the first time in 1947),¹¹ not only does he deny any value to the philosophy of humanism, but he even gives his reasons for this. He identifies it with the affirmation of the *Homo humanus* as the ideal of the Romans, which was ennobled by using the concept of *paideia* (just as in Jaeger's schema). "It is in Rome that we encounter the first humanism. And it remains essentially a specifically Roman manifestation, resulting from the encounter of Rome with late Hellenistic culture. What we call the Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries in Italy is in fact a *renascentia romanitatis*".¹²

Heidegger affirms that the humanist conception does not grasp the essence of man, that is that man's *humanitas* has not been

¹⁰ W. Jaeger, *Antike und Humanismus*, in *Humanismus*, Darmstadt, Ed. Oppermann 1970, p. 22-23.

¹¹ Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus*, *op. cit.*

¹² *Idem*, p. 62.

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thought through in a sufficiently profound manner, because all anthropological philosophy excludes original speculation. Again in the *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger stresses the fact that humanism, beginning with the problem of man, should, if it hopes to have a philosophical significance, be based on anthropology. "In this way *humanitas* remains at the heart of such thinking, for humanism consists in this: reflecting and ensuring that man be human and not in-human".¹³

The *Homo romanus* of the Renaissance is the opposite of the *Homo barbarus* as the scholasticism of the Middle Ages understood it. "This is why humanism, in its historic manifestations, always includes a *studium humanitatis* that expressly links up with Antiquity and that each time presents itself as a revival of Hellenism. This is what our 18th century humanism reveals, as illustrated by Winckelmann, Goethe and Schiller." And Heidegger immediately notes (which is quite important for our problematic) that "Hölderlin, on the other hand, is not a part of humanism for the simple reason that he conceives the destiny of man's essence in a more original manner than humanism is able to do."¹⁴

And further: "Any determination of man's essence that, whether it knows it or not, already presupposes the interpretation of the beings without raising the question about the truth of Being, is metaphysical."¹⁵ Humanism—the same as any traditional metaphysics—is not conscious of the difference that exists between the problem of beings and the problem of Being (what Heidegger calls "ontological difference"); and this blindness is revealed in the fact that in its philosophizing it begins with the problem of man, that is one being among others. In making this choice, "humanism makes it impossible to raise the question of Being". "Metaphysical tradition represents beings in their being and thus conceives the being of beings. But it does not think of the difference between Being and beings. Metaphysics does not raise the question dealing with the truth of Being itself. This is why it also never asks in what manner the essence of man belongs to the truth of Being. This

¹³ *Idem*, p. 61.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 63.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 64.

question... is inaccessible to metaphysics as metaphysics.”¹⁶

There are two initial conclusions to be drawn from these passages. First, it is beyond discussion that Heidegger begins with the presumed validity of the traditional schema regarding humanism; humanism for him is a way of philosophizing that has its point of departure in man, that is a being. And this is why it can be considered only as a variant of traditional metaphysics that begins with the problem of beings. The fact that Platonism and neo-Platonism have been rethought from a Christian point of view makes even more evident the dependence of humanism on traditional metaphysics. Heidegger thus assumes all the prejudices that affect modern apologists of humanism. Secondly, the Heideggerian critique addressed to humanism—and consequently to all traditional metaphysics—has its roots in the thesis that humanism identifies the problem of beings with the problem of Being, and that it thereby overlooks not only the radical difference between the two problems (ontological difference), but also the impossibility, when dealing with the problem of beings, to arrive at a solution to the problem of Being.

2. THE ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE. THE SPHERE OF BEING IS NOT THAT OF RATIONALITY

The linking of the problems—Heidegger’s anti-humanism; the validity or non-validity of the traditional historical schema according to which humanism is interpreted; the refusal of traditional metaphysics; the revaluation of poetry and rhetoric in their philosophical role—obliges me, before speaking of rhetorical humanism, to consider what seems to me to be the center of Heideggerian thought.

To understand Heidegger’s anti-humanism, we must above all penetrate into the speculative significance of the “ontological difference,” so often poorly understood and that has been the source of numerous discussions. However, in order to understand

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 64.

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this central philosophical concept, we must for an instant remove ourselves from the historicist (and humanist) atmosphere that precisely this concept challenges and aims to dissipate. I will also use a metaphor that is completely external to discussions between historians in order to explain the Heideggerian thesis.

In any game we have two very different elements: the rules by which to play that constitute as such the particular nature of the game, and the instruments of the game (dice, cards, balls). Even the most attentive analysis of the instruments of the game (dice, cards, balls) does not by itself make it possible to identify the game in question since the same instruments can be used for different games. To illustrate our thesis we can also use a terminology that is much in vogue today because of the interest in semantics. Every element, every sign, no matter what kind, can only be understood by reason of a “code”. The telegraphic signs of the Morse alphabet are intelligible only in terms of the Morse code, and such a code cannot be deduced from the signs it uses.

The exact same is true for the “ontological difference”. The problem of beings is not the problem of Being because beings, participial forms of Being, are understandable only in terms of Being (the “code” of beings), particularly in that beings themselves, in different existential situations, acquire different meanings. The rational explanation of cause and effect only give us the view of the temporal succession of phenomena (before, after), not their significance.

This is the meaning of Heidegger’s remark, “Before uttering a word, man should first allow himself to be overcome by Being and to prevent thereby the danger that, without so being overcome, he would have but little, or rarely, something to say”.¹⁷ This is the way that Heidegger’s thesis should be understood: “the word is the abode of Being”.

For the reasons I have just outlined, we can better understand why Heidegger refused traditional metaphysics. Since it commences with the problem of beings, it is consequently incapable of raising the problem of Being, and even less so of resolving it.

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 60.

Heidegger refused humanism for the same reasons, humanism that he understood, according to a generally accepted historical schema, as anthropology, namely a doctrine that speaks of one being among others, man. Once the ontological distinction between beings and Being had been consolidated and clarified, Heidegger went even further by demonstrating the impossibility of defining Being rationally, logically. Let us examine his arguments in this respect.

In his book *Grundbegriffe* (his 1941 lectures in Freiburg), Heidegger used six arguments to demonstrate that the sphere of Being is that of contradiction and therefore not that of rationality; consequently the traditional thesis of the priority of the rational word cannot be defended.

I will limit myself to briefly citing six of his arguments. The first is that we must define Being as that which is supremely universal; it is only because of this universality that we can say that *all beings are*. At the same time, and in contradiction to this affirmation, we are obliged to define Being as that which is the most *particular*; in all individual beings, Being *is*. To be obliged to define Being as supremely universal and particular at the same time means reaching a contradictory conclusion. The second argument is that we must define Being as that which is essentially intelligible; we recognize beings as such in that they participate in Being. But on the other hand we are obliged to define Being as that which is the most obscure because (and in fact this is how we experience it) it eludes any rational definition.

But if Being is not rationally identifiable, how and where, originally, do we endure and experience reality? By means of the word. But what word, if not the rational word? Heidegger's response is clear and unambiguous: the rational word cannot claim primacy. Poetic and metaphorical words have the power to clear out an opening in the original forest in which man finds himself.

Interpreting a poem by Stephan George, *Das Wort*, Heidegger writes, "The final verse, '*Nothing exists where the word is lacking*', recalls the relationship between word and thing by exposing it in such a way that the word itself appears to be this relationship, for it attracts to Being and maintains all things in Being, whatever these things may be. Without the word... the totality of things, the *world*, is swallowed up in obscurity with the *I* that transports

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everything that is marvelous and imagined to the ultimate frontier of its territory, to the source of names".¹⁸ "Language is the abode of Being".¹⁹ This is the original value of the poetic word. Heidegger begins with his interpretation of fragments of Parmenides and Heraclites, the chorus of Sophocles' *Antigone*, and finally the poems of Hölderlin and Trakl. From there he draws the substance of his thesis that it is the poet who establishes the time and place of the *Dasein*.

3. HUMANISM. THE "ILLUMINATING" AND "CARDINAL" NATURE OF THE POETIC WORD

My intention here evidently is not so much to interpret Heidegger's thinking, but to reevaluate the rhetorical humanism that this thinking disdains. And it is in fact the Heideggerian thesis of the priority of the poetic and metaphoric word that brings us to the most important point for us: the specificity of humanistic thought that does not, in its particular and new philosophizing, begin with the problem of beings, but with that of the word, namely the poetic, metaphorical and rhetorical word.

We must above all elucidate the following: for *onto*-theological metaphysics, only the logical, rational word is valid and objective. Any other word, for example the metaphorical word that transfers the significance of one rationally defined term to another (eagle = power), can have a poetic, literary or even rhetorical sense, apt to strike sentiments and to convince, but it does not have a philosophical function. The word, as expression of rationality, must be abstract, a-historical. However, already with the decline of medieval thinking, we see Dante laying claim to the original nature of non-rational, non-a-historical language, that is, the *vulgus*.

At this point in my reflections, I must explain the meaning of the title of this study: the rhetorical humanism that needs to be reevaluated.

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, Pfulligen, Neske.

¹⁹ *Idem*.

In the first place, unlike traditional metaphysics, I understand by rhetorical humanism that humanism (the opposite of the Platonizing and neo-Platonizing variety to which we generally refer) that does not begin with an ontology (that is with a philosophical activity that attempts to define beings rationally) but with the problem of the word. This historical word, not abstract, not rational, clarifies reality. And I refer in this regard to Dante, in the *De vulgari eloquentia* and in the *Convivio*, that I will only mention briefly.

In the second place I want to make explicit the domain for which humanism recognizes the non-pre-eminence of the rational word, and even refuses it polemically. By this it detaches itself from an ontology that should—according to the traditional metaphysical schema—legitimate and provide a foundation for the word. I refer in this regard to Leonardo Bruni.

In the third place, I intend to indicate with the concept rhetorical humanism that tendency that recognizes the historicity of the word and that implies the necessity of rhetorical philosophizing; and here I speak briefly of Lorenzo Valla.

I must limit myself to these few remarks. In other works published in the U.S.A., Germany and Italy, I was able to develop the thesis of the rehabilitation of rhetorical humanism.²⁰

It is thus necessary to begin with the most clearly prehumanist period, namely that of Dante, whose thesis, in correlation with the problems that concern us here, has perhaps not yet sufficiently been brought to light. Dante found himself in a position that could be called dramatic, for he stood at the crossroads of the scholastic conception of the word and of the conception that humanists were later to develop.

On the one hand Dante recognized that, according to scholastic tradition, it is necessary to have a form of communication that,

²⁰ *Rhetoric as Philosophy*, Pennsylvania University Press, 1980; *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism*, Binghamton, N.Y., Center of Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1983; *Heidegger e il problema dell'umanesimo*, Introduction by C. Vasoli, Naples, Guida, 1985; *Einführung in philosophische Probleme des Humanismus*, Darmstadt, 1986; *Folly and Insanity in Renaissance Literature* (together with M. Panizza Lorch), Binghamton, N.Y., Center of Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1983.

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because of its universality, goes beyond all temporal and local relativity, essentially objective and as such scientific. This universality was guaranteed by Latin that Dante supposed (wrongly so) *inventum* because of its a-historicity, a language, according to Dante, that does not change with the times and places and that as such is not subjected to the arbitrary consequences of history nor to its transformations.²¹

At the same time, in the *De vulgari eloquentia* also and in the *Convivio*, Dante takes up the defence of the vernacular language that, far from being a-historical, is to the contrary essentially historical, and he attributes to it four essential functions. It is *illuminans*, *cardinalis*, *aulica*, *curiale*.

I will touch briefly on the first two functions attributed to the vernacular language; it is *illuminans*, in the sense that Dante gives this word because it makes clear the significance of the real by causing it to appear in its full splendor.²² The vernacular language is *cardinalis* because it constitutes the hinge (*cardo*) upon which, like a door, every linguistic expression rests and rotates.²³

We have here the thesis (unknown to medieval thinking) that language is rooted and lives in the historicity linked with time and place, and not in abstract rationality. And Dante—as he says—went around trying to identify this historical language, the “panther” as he calls it, hidden in the underbrush of dialects, and he sets himself up as the poet (*poeta orator*) who will open up a historical clearing for his people. “And such grandeur I give to this friend (the vernacular) because of its potential and hidden value, I confer on it actually and openly in its own operation, which is to manifest the opinion that has been conceived.”²⁴

But does Dante not contradict himself when, on the one hand, he recognizes the “scientific” nature of Latin, in that he erroneously supposes it to be a-historical and abstract, while on the other he honors the essentially historical vernacular language by composing his poetic works in it?

²¹ Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, I, IX, 11.

²² *Idem*, I, XVII, 2.

²³ *Idem*, I, XVIII, 7.

²⁴ Dante, *Il Convivio*, I, X, 9.

From the medieval point of view we could understand Dante's thesis. He does not want to be a philosopher, and poetry, according to the medieval tradition, can be legitimated if it is a "veil," a "skin" (*velamen-tegumentum*) that conceals the "true". And Dante in fact proclaims Christian truth under a poetic "veil" in his *Commedia*.

Nevertheless, by interpreting Dante's thesis in this manner, we underestimate the revolution he inspired. He declared categorically that the vernacular, historical language, and not the theological language of ontology and of metaphysics, opens the original space where the property of a term or of a phrase can be discussed and specified, and where rules for the language of a people can be set (the *curialis* nature of the vernacular language), for the *curia* is the place where laws are established. This is the imperial court.

Ontology, as presupposition for language, is abandoned. The use of a historical language implies that it be *illuminans*, and that as *cardinalis*, it be the root of the here and now of its era, of its country, of its people.

Dante's thesis is thus doubly original: above all the valorization of non-abstract but historical language, and then the awareness that the fantastic, poetic, metaphorical word has a rhetorical function, namely a task that is incumbent on the poet, not on the philosopher or the metaphysician.

But Dante does not remain isolated. Albertino Mussato (1261-1329), in his *Epistulae* on the essence of poetry and on the priority of its role, affirmed—a great scandal for medieval thinking—that the object of poetry is not logical truth, but the "discovery of the real in its historicity," and he emphasizes, as an example, the parallelism that exists between mythical sacred revelations and those of the Old Testament. "In the former Jupiter strikes the Giants with his thunderbolts; in the Old Testament God strikes men with the confusion of languages. God is for us what Jupiter was for the pagans".²⁵ In Greek mythology, as narrated by the poets, the gods swore by the Styx. This, according to Mussato, parallels the words of Christ who said that the waters of baptism

²⁵ A. Mussato, *Tragoediae duae, Eclogae, Fragmenta, Epistulae*, Lugduni Batavorum, Ed. Peter van der Aa, 1722, *Epistula* IV, col. 41 A.

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are the source of life.²⁶ And Mussato, summarizing his thesis, affirmed that poetry is the original theology.²⁷

4. PHILOLOGY AS TROPOLOGY

These texts of Dante and of Mussato are already sufficient to establish a particular historical principle that is, it seems to me, characteristic of humanism. The negation of the pre-eminence of the rational word is expressed first of all in terms of the valorization of the historical word, that is of the word that recognizes the here and now (the situation). In this manner, a rhetorical function is recognized for the historical word. But historical language is an essentially rhetorical language, and rhetorical language gives to terms significances relative to the situation; it reevaluates the metaphor to which traditional logic denied any philosophical function. It was a poet who committed himself to realizing a rhetorical task with his poetry: Dante as poet and *orator*. Rhetoric and poetry are in fact closely related.

But through what experience do humanists arrive at the recognition that the original problem is not that of beings—which could be defined only by means of logic (abstract beings do not exist)—but that of the rhetorical and poetic word?

I refer to a much later author: Leonardo Bruni (1389-1444). The task to which Bruni lent himself was the translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that was to be substituted for the *Liber Ethicorum* of Robert Grosseteste (written in 1274), including the revised version attributed to Guillaume de Moerbeke. Bruni prepared his translation in the years 1416-1417. This work allowed him to experience the priority of the problem of the non-logical word, thus inaugurating a reversal of traditional thinking.

In his radical opposition to the scholastic conception, Bruni (whether in the *De recta interpretatione*, or in *De studiis et litteris*, or in the prefaces to his translations of Greek texts) refused any *a priori* and a-historical interpretation of the word as basis for a

²⁶ *Idem*, *Epistula XVIII*, col. 50 E.

²⁷ *Idem*, *Epistula VII*, col. 44 C.

translation. His point of departure for an objective translation was not an ontology (which would have made it impossible from the outset to experience the numerous changes the meaning of a word can undergo in the course of time) nor the subjectivity and the relativity of man, and consequently of his language. Bruni's thesis seems much more original than that. Bruni noted that a single term (*verbum*) in different contexts could assume different significations. He was thus obliged to admit that the meaning of words do not have a "rigid" logical determination. It is the *res*, the "thing" that undoubtedly commits the word, for it is there that it obtains its significance.²⁸ Bruni liberates the *res* from its rational determination, since the significance of the term is constituted by its context and by its situation.²⁹

The various aspects of a *res* are manifested in the realm of temporality; this is why a "softness" is proper to words.³⁰

If the essence of language should refer to an *a priori* of the *sermo internus* (as the scholastic interpretation postulates), language would find itself unable to reveal the particular concrete thing, in all its variability and richness (*copia*). The translator must consider the text as a cloth whose every fiber, every knot, will take on an ever new significance, depending on its position and its color. The "full" and "abundant" discourse (*copia verborum*) is born of the urgency of the expression in a given context.³¹

But Bruni does not stop with this philological observation: terms vary depending on their literary contexts. He also expressly emphasizes that the historicity of man leads to a recognition of the necessity of seeking the meaning of words in the diverse situations of life, which is only possible if we admit that the urgency of the circumstances must be adapted differently each time; and since it is in function of circumstances that the same word acquires different significations, it follows that neither philology nor culture

²⁸ L. Bruni, *Epistularum libri VIII*, Florence, 1741, vol. II, p. 108.

²⁹ L. Bruni, *Ad P.P. Histrum dialogus*, in *Prosatori italiani del Quattrocento*, under the direction of E. Garin, Milan, 1952, p. 44.

³⁰ L. Bruni, *Humanistische philosophische Schriften*, Leipzig, Ed. H. Baron, 1929, p. 128.

³¹ *Idem*, p. 129.

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are born of ontology but, rather, of *letters*.³²

From philology Bruni moved to experienced reality and referred to the wealth and immensity of what appeared and pressed in concrete existence³³ by stressing the celerity and agility necessary in the search for truth. He who has not had the experience, through philology and the historic word, of the era in which he lives, with its exigencies, cannot succeed in realizing his language.³⁴ Detachment from the historical context assumes the nature of an abstract intellectual attitude; the situation must be experienced with a language that is adapted each time. "It is absurd to live closed in on oneself, in solitude, in the company of oneself".³⁵

Bruni thus delivers the *res* of its rational determination by revealing that its signification is constituted in the realm of the situation.³⁶ And in this sense Bruni is hoping for a *vera philosophia, vera scientia non fatua*.³⁷ At this point there is a radical reversal of rational conception; the capacity of responding to demands that are imposed according to circumstances is the "ingenious" capacity. Proper to *ingenium* but not to *ratio* is mobility, agility (*versutia*): the word, language, should be, depending on the situation, agile, mobile.³⁸ Proper to the acuity of *ingenium* is the discovery of resemblances and similitudes depending on situations. Bruni stresses the fact that the "ingenious" activity is instantaneous, rapid as a flash.³⁹

Logic is the science that requires an exact, established, rigid, dry language, without imagination; the tropes, the transfers, the *dicendi figurae*, are, on the other hand, the modes for expressing oneself always and in a new manner, in the ever different coercion of the here and now.⁴⁰

When the word is recognized as the signifying expression in light

³² *Idem*, p. 18.

³³ L. Bruni, *Epistularum libri VIII, op. cit.*, p. 236.

³⁴ L. Bruni, *Oratio in funere Nannis Strozzae*, in *Stephan Baluzu miscellaneorum liber III*, Paris, 1680, p. 321.

³⁵ L. Bruni, *Ad P.P. Histrum dialogus, op. cit.*, p. 44.

³⁶ *Idem*, p. 44.

³⁷ L. Bruni, *Epistularum libri VIII, op. cit.*, p. 156.

³⁸ L. Bruni, *Ad P.P. Histrum dialogus, op. cit.*, p. 44.

³⁹ L. Bruni, *In nebulonem maledictum*, G. Zippel Ed., Florence, 1980, p. 84.

⁴⁰ L. Bruni, *Humanistische philosophische Schriften, op. cit.*, p. 8.

of the demand of circumstances, when the problem of the word obtains priority in place of ontology, when ingeniousness is recognized as the faculty that reveals new relationships and abolishes those already in evidence in a superseded situation, then Bruni's request for a rhetorical *copia verborum* becomes understandable, necessary in every new situation.⁴¹

The entire problematic in which Cristoforo Landino (1424-1498) discussed, in the *Camuldulenses disputationes*, the primacy of rational thinking and of the corresponding language, or of practical thinking and thus of rhetorical language, was already contained in Bruni's treatise. We see here the continuity of a specifically humanistic theme. We note a complete change in the significance of the words. The word "philosopher" regains the sense of the word "philologist," and true philosophy is no longer traditional *onto-theological* metaphysics, but the interpretation of these texts. It is for this reason that Poliziano (1454-1494) declared he was not a philosopher (in the traditional sense of the word) but an interpreter,⁴² and he inaugurated his famous introduction to Aristotle's *Analytica priora* not with a rational assertion but with a metaphor.

This also explains the importance of the thesis of Guarino of Verona (1374-1460) relative to the pre-eminence of *litterae*: for pedagogy it is no longer necessary to begin with ontology but with the historicity of the word that is revealed in the *litterae*, in the interpretation of the texts. "I do not consider human someone who does not appreciate letters, who does not love them, who does not make them his own, who does not plunge himself into them."⁴³ The *litterae* and the interpretation of texts "not only make man more erudite (*doctior*) but better (*melior*)," they supply "*bene vivendi rationes*".⁴⁴

Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) had already dealt with this problem in his *De laboribus Herculis*, an allegorical essay that

⁴¹ L. Bruni, *Ad P.P. Histrum dialogus*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁴² Poliziano, *Le Selve e la Strega*, under the direction of I. Del Lungo, Florence, 1925, p. 220.

⁴³ Guarino Veronese, *Epistolario*, Venice, Ed. R. Sabbadini, 1915-1919, vol. I, letter 148, p. 244.

⁴⁴ *Idem*, letter 257, p. 402.

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manages to demonstrate the continuity of this completely new form of philosophizing; the metaphor becomes the basis for *scientia*.

From all of this it is clear that the problem of rhetorical humanism, in its specific philosophizing (in which it distinguishes itself completely from Platonism or Christian neo-Platonism) is no longer a reflection on beings and their rational definition, but on the word as expression of historical necessities of the here and now. And if the word takes on an ever-new significance depending on the literary or philosophical context or depending on historical situations, the word in its essence is no longer a rational word but a metaphorical word because, depending on the situation, it sees a new meaning “transferred” to itself. But if the metaphorical quality and the transposition of the word is recognized in its essence, and if metaphor is essential to poetry, poetry acquires a fundamentally speculative function. This is what Coluccio Salutati demonstrated in his *De laboribus Herculis*.

It is within the realm of this consideration that the original quality of humanistic thinking becomes evident. Humanistic ideas spread as far as Spain with Vivés but were interrupted in Italy during the Counter-Reformation. They reappeared once more with Gracian’s question of *ingenium*, and in Italy itself with Tesaurò and Pellegrini, to achieve full maturity with Vico.

This entire consideration was either unknown or erroneously understood as narrowly literary. It was not recognized as characteristic of humanist philosophy, and this precisely because of the pre-eminence of rationalist philosophy that ultimately led to German idealism. The result was that any reasoned and specific identification, truly revolutionary in Salutati’s *De laboribus Herculis* (in which *scientia* and the metaphorical word are identified) was lost and forgotten.

But did Heidegger, who proclaimed his anti-humanism, know this tradition better than the specialists of Italian humanism? If he had known it, he would not have been able so nonchalantly (if you will pardon the expression) to identify humanism with an anthropology based on traditional metaphysics. He never had more than an indirect knowledge of humanism, with the biases of modern interpretations that saw in it a philosophical epigone of Antiquity.

5. RHETORICAL PHILOSOPHIZING

We are now before the third task that our reasoning implies. If we accept the pre-eminence of the historical word over the rational word, it necessarily follows that the rhetorical word no longer has the task of “persuading” of the advantages of a rational truth, but that it should become the expression of an original form of philosophy.

In reality German ideology, with its rationalism, barred access to this essentially humanistic question and convinced us that humanism could only be a form of anthropology or simply a philosophy incapable of rising to the full height of the concept in which alone true philosophy consists.

Because it does not commence with the problem of the rational identification of beings and because it notes in the word and through the word the expression of the urgency of the situation, humanism brings out clearly the requirement that the word retain its full scope in its own historical horizon, and that consequently rhetoric, that speaks in the realm of the here and now, not be reduced to a simple instrument of persuasion.

It is precisely in rhetorical humanism that awareness of the expression of Being in the historicity of the word is revealed. With the pre-eminence of the problem of the word (as we discovered in Bruni, Poliziano, Landino, Guarino and Pontano) philosophy tended to identify itself with rhetoric in humanism.

Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) remarked that rhetoric, in the ancient tradition, was the realm of the *copia verborum*, of the richness of the language, of *euporia*, and he refers to Cicero and Quintilian. The link between words and things seems so close that, according to Valla, rhetoric has the capacity to bring out clearly the position of the *res* in the realm of the here and now. Rhetorical language situates beings in the context of the historical situation, a dimension that is neither ontic nor subjective.

The identification of philosophy and rhetoric comes about from their common roots, clearly evident in language each time we use or think about a metaphor. For metaphors make it possible to have a particular usage for non-rational language, a transfer of different significations to the same term.

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Valla, for example, criticizes the abstract, rational definition of *fortitudo*, and he bases his criticism on the model of other definitions of virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Fortitudo* can become temerity if, in a certain situation, one fights even when seeing the futility of the struggle. In criticizing the abstract definition of a term, Valla notes, “Why refer two completely different things to the same unit? Why give to the same term two additional meanings that its nature does not admit?”⁴⁵

The situations in which the sense of the real appears are not contemporary but successive; from this fact comes the necessity of the change in significance of words, “and it is absurd to join together what time has separated.”⁴⁶

The three moments of time—not yet, now, no longer—express the urgency of situations that follow one after another, into which we are led. This is the reason why the meaning of a word changes. “It is better to consider each action and each thing one at a time. At the same time I can be moderate and immoderate... and the same word can express praise or reproof.”⁴⁷

Consequently a rhetorical word, like an ironic word, is not a game, a “literary elegance,” but the profoundly philosophical negation of any pre-eminence of the rational univocity of language. Irony becomes the expression of a philosophizing that is much more serious and opportune than the poor rational language that results from abstract pedanticism. This is the meaning of the irony in Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly*, Leon Battista Alberti’s *Momus*.

Hence the programmatic thesis among the great humanists of the importance of rhetoric, “queen of the sciences”. And Valla also emphasizes, “The awareness of this thesis comes from my education, that is, to have been free in my studies, because I was not initiated by philosophy but by rhetoric and poetry, much more enlightening.”⁴⁸

Characteristic in this respect is his criticism of Cicero and the supremacy he gives to Quintilian. Cicero, according to Valla,

⁴⁵ L. Valla, *De Voluptate*, M. Lorch, Bari, Adriatica, 1970, p. 96.

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 96.

⁴⁷ *Idem*, p. 97.

⁴⁸ *Idem*, p. 14.

unlike Quintilian, did not sufficiently recognize that true philosophy is rhetoric. He states that he would have preferred that Cicero, in his philosophical treatises, had reasoned not as a philosopher but as a rhetorician and that he had used the same freedom to treat philosophy with rhetorical arguments. "I would have preferred that the sword he had received from rhetoric be used against fraudulent philosophers to punish them like criminals."⁴⁹

In the same vein, Mario Nizolio (1488-1567), denying the supposed ontological value of universals, brought out the urgency of the immediate, the concrete, and consequently the consideration of rhetoric. And precisely in this sense he proposed a less hasty philosophical reflection "on whatever separates science from eloquence."⁵⁰

The problem raised by the translator and the philologist, who have each one observed that each term always receives a new signification depending on the context and the situation, leads to stating the problem of the word otherwise. The word is no longer meant to identify beings outside of a time and place, but rather to do so with the feeling of urgency that is necessary in the historical situation.

Ontology, as a presupposition for language, is abandoned. *Litterae* obtain pre-eminence in humanistic education because they begin with the experience of mutability, of historicity, of words, which logic, in its abstraction, prefers not to know. In this way the rhetorical use of the transposition of the meanings of a term is legitimated philosophically; this is not produced on the basis of a metaphysics of beings, but because of situational codes that, by retaining and succeeding, "open" history.

If philosophy is the science of first principles and if these first principles are not visible objects but exist within language—as the humanist translator and philologist experienced—they can only be made evident in a rhetorical discourse, and not in a logical one. Consequently rhetoric, even as method, takes on a philosophical

⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 14.

⁵⁰ M. Nizolio, *De veris principiis et vera ratione philosophandi contra pseudo philosophos libri IV*, Rome, Ed. Q. Breen, 1965, vol. II, p. 189.

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role. Rhetoric is no longer the science of persuasion but the language of man, of the *sophos*, who not only knows (*epistatai*) but directs, guides, attracts. It was in this sense that Guarino of Verona affirmed that *litterae* do not make a man educated (*doctus*) but better (*melior*).

Metaphor makes the invisible visible (an eagle = power), and the metaphorical image is “ingenious” and not rational. The metaphor, to which a situation obliges us, becomes a deliverance from the anguish of life, so that the *word*, according to Pontano, is seen to be the destiny of man.⁵¹

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⁵¹ G. Pontano, *I dialoghi*, Florence, Ed. C. Privitera, 1943, p. 270.