

Topic number 1

*At the beginning there was the word...*

The world was a horizon of the occurrence of meaning. But then the borders started to fall and everything that was left was a line, a bare row of points which describe a routine in which we dwell. We inhabit screens rather than spaces. Our existence became a free floating behavior, a mere following of chores and duties. On our everyday journey from sunrise to sunset we somewhere lost our humanity and became exactly what society wanted us to be: consumers. But this videosphere, this great process of losing sense (as Baudrillard named it) does not even sell us goods, it sells us images. We returned in Plato's cave and we live among TV shows, commercials, ads, photos- we live in a world which has a singular temporal dimension: present. And the present moment lasts just as much as a sight does: it allows us to consume the image as if it were our innermost substance, as we are filling a lack. We are ourselves just images, perfectible images which flow on a wide, aporetic screen towards a better tomorrow, a better man, a better life, a better democracy.... It seems like everything is *a venir* and we are all waiting in a huge room, looking at a meaningless screen.

But we need sense. It's our innermost nature to be looking for something, to break the bonds and see what is beyond the limit. It's our innermost nature to be searching the invisible, the hidden,. But when nothing is hidden, nothing is to be searched. And this unhiddenness that surrounds locks our homesickness and transforms us in followers of never ending routines. As Novalis said, philosophy is homesickness, the urge to be everywhere at home. Can we be at home in a world which lacks the world? Can we abide a space which presents itself in a merchantable wrapping which, in the end, has nothing to hide? In this videosphere, we cannot be at home anywhere, we cannot inhabit a world which only collects present moments and turns them into images that are meant to be shared. What we are facing is philosophy losing its primacy. We cannot have a *philosophia prote*, not here, not in this moment when everything has been reduced to sights, images and screenshots. And, if we look closer, it is not only philosophy that lost its primacy: science itself lost its objectivity since Heisenberg proofed with his relativity relations that in each experiment in quantum physics the observer involuntarily changes the positions of particles. Politics became a waiting of a message, a message that does not come and, in all this waiting, countless innocent people are being killed. What is to be done?

My thesis is that we need to go back to words. Not the words used in commercials, not the words we are saying everyday in meaningless conversations. But the words God used when he created the world. The words that can restore the sense, the words that have power to build sense, the words that would give the world back its essence. From now on, this paper is concerned with how the words turned into literature can offer us the sense we lost and how it can help us escape and break the videosphere into pieces.

On the threshold

In their work *What is philosophy*, Deleuze and Guattari defined philosophy as the art of making concepts. Their standpoint is that in philosophy words become concepts and that the grail of each philosopher is to make his own concept and to relinquish the other philosopher's concepts. They further explain that philosophy turns words into entities, into a sort of spheres that have a particular meaning. The words in philosophy become 'rigid' as they are given a certain sense which cannot be

# Essay 82

changed and is not relative to the context. Philosophers tend to express everything clearly- as Wittgenstein said, anything that can be said, can be said clearly- and to clarify everything. But in this whole process the word uses its expressive power- it becomes similar to a figure which is attributed a certain, fixed value. The words lose their power to become metaphors. When sentences are simply translated into propositional attitudes, they lose their form and are reduced to their meaning. It is like they were mere instruments which allow the communication process to take part. However, there are things that cannot be said: in *Tractatus Wittgenstein* explains that those things can be *shown*. In a certain manner, literature shows those things but still using words. Is literature the realm of the ineffable?

In Antiquity, Plato considered poetry (which is a major field of literature) to be harmful for the human mind, as it is the imitation of an imitation of an imitation: in his conception, the material world is a copy of the world of ideas and poetry only copies, writes down that material world. But literature is, in fact, anything but a copy. To understand it, we need to approach it in a certain manner, which Kant explained in his aesthetic theory. It regards the *sensus communis*, our emotional substrate. Nevertheless, it presents itself in a wrapping that seems to require a totally different approach, since words need to be read and interpreted. This is the peculiarity of literature among all arts: it does not address solely to the mind and neither does it address solely to the soul, it requires a special stance which is fundamental. If we perceive it only with our minds, we can fall in the trap of considering it a worthless imitation since it does not provide any reliable truths or information. If we perceive it only with our soul, we can get lost in it since it does not offer bare emotions, but they are hidden under the masks of words along. Umberto Eco explains that this is the reason why every novel, poem, etc is like a forest in which we can get lost. This perspective will be discussed later in this essay.

Hitherto, we can place literature on a threshold-i.e. the border between the mind and the soul. Its realm is a *khora*, a receptacle, a matrix where the keyword is possibility. It offers to us in a discrete manner: not like an image which invades our sight, not even like a painting which gives itself to the eye and provokes them look forward, to look for the invisible. It is like a door: but this door is neither open nor closed. It is a door that has been shattered. Someone already passed through it, offering a bare glimpse of what is inside and leaving a hole shaped like his silhouette in the door. That 'someone' is the author, which opens the text firstly as an empty place and fills it with his emotions, impressions, thoughts. In order to get in, all we need to do is to adapt ourselves to the dimension of the hole that has been cut in the door and to enter that mysterious room. We are like the prisoners which stepped outside Plato's cave and need to adapt their eyes to the dazzling light. But inside is darkness. The words are silent. They do not speak alone. They need to be awoken.

Magritte painted *this* door and called it *The Unexpected Answer*. Could this be the answer to today's most tantalizing question, i.e. how can we restore the meaning, the sense? Should we step inside?

## The narrative forest

If we dare to step inside, the dark will be replaced by the contours of a whole new world. Umberto Eco saw this as a forest which offers countless paths for each reader, each leading to a different destination. This does not mean that the text does not have a fixed structure but that the structure itself is an opening, a dwelling of countless possibilities. Even time in literature possesses a Husserlian thickness, to the extent that it holds, in fact, three stories at the same time, as Miguel de

## Essay 82

Unamuno explained: there is the actual story which is told, there is the story which the author thinks he told and there is the interpretation of the reader. Therefore, it is a horizon of meaning which occurs as a triad, a horizon that bears no delimitation, that welcomes each stranger and allows him to become a master. In order to explain this, I will refer to Derrida's essay about hospitality. He states that the common hospitality is a simple convention, a universal right of each stranger. Kant ascertained that the law of hospitality presumes that the stranger is welcomed to the extent that he recognizes the host's authority. Derrida further explains that this not hospitality but a mere following of a moral principle; hospitality should occur without any condition and giving the stranger the freedom to feel *at home*. My point is that the narrative forest- in fact each literature work- offers this unconditional hospitality. The author is not the master of the world he created, he remains there only as a discrete guiding voice. His presence can be felt only through the subjectivity of the events narrated. And this becomes even more obvious in poetry, the 'most' aporetic realm of all: there each word is subject to interpretation and there is no such thing as a guide in interpreting.

As I stated above, literature does not only constitute itself as a horizon of meaning, as an openness towards the essence which our society has lost. It also holds innermost human values and attunements that we have lost, and hospitality is just one of them. Further on I will focus on the communication implied by literature and its peculiarities.

### Alterity

It has been said- and even the topic I chose states this- that the novel (and basically each literary species) is justified only if it is a mode of communication irreducible to any other. My standpoint is that the communication in literature is the most authentic and I am going to explain this.

To begin with, communication cannot be understood as a mere exchange of ideas. Philosophers are not communicating ideas in their works, they are stating and explaining them through concepts. But, however, writers do communicate with their readers. A statement about this was made by Umberto Eco, which affirms that every literature work is an 'open' one and requires a reader to finish it. But this finishing does not emerge as if there was a sentence left without being completed and someone writes the missing words. This presumes that the whole of the opera is made by the writer and the reader together. A similar allegory is to be found in Heidegger's conception, which states that the Dasein does not acknowledge the world but is in it, they form a circle together; just the same the reader enters into the book and becomes part of it through interpreting it.

Nonetheless, the communication that occurs in the realm of the book is not a monologue but a dialogue. What the author communicates in the work is not only certain impressions, descriptions, feeling since these cannot actually be communicated, for instance I can write down 'The wine I drank last night had a delicate taste' but however I cannot be sure that you will actually understand what I meant since qualia is purely subjective. Moreover, as the empirists explained, we cannot describe a sensation- since it is utterly temporary- but our memory of that sensation; the writes cannot furnish us their authentic impressions. The main thing that is hidden between the words is the author's face, his alterity. Levinas explains that the face is not just the part of the body where the eyes and mouth are situated and the play of the features takes place but it is the whole humanity expressed metaphorically. A further explanation is required: the face is a symbol as it is the most particular physical trait of everyone, but when speaking of it Levinas looks for another scene. The face of the author, which is present in the literary work is definitely not something corporeal but something

## Essay 82

transcendent. It offers an opening towards the author's bare soul, uncovered, unhidden. And this opening is an opening towards alterity, since the author is someone other than me, someone I do not know, someone with a whole different background. The emergence of the face does not presume that the reader judges the author or overinterpretes each passage in order to gather information but that, in the vicinity of the nakedness of another soul, the reader itself reveals his inner face. The dialogue that happens in the literary work is a face to face dialogue. As I am travelling in the narrative forest and I am encountering the author as a face, my own face is uncovering due to the presence of alterity.

In this hyperreality we live in, the face to face communication became a utopia. It is not because humans have been metaphorically ex-faced but because when they encounter each other they are not looking for faces, they are exchanging information, or they simply chatter. The face cannot reveal itself in a world of images since their emergence is overabundant to the eye, even if it doesn't feed the soul.

### A question is imposing itself

Hitherto I explained the nature of literature and why it can become a solution of the lack of meaning we live in. But at the beginning of my essay I also stated that philosophy lost its primate. The question which is imposing itself now is whether literature can survive without philosophy and what is the connection between the two.

The fundamental distinction between these two is obviously the way they regard words. For philosophy, they are the entity which allows thoughts to be expressed, similarly to what is the paper to the writer. Even in the linguistic turn it was not the words that were put in the middle of philosophical inquiry but the ineffable in contrast to what can be expressed through words. Moreover, certain philosophers, such as Rorty argued that the linguistic turn was actually a necessity considering that at the beginning of the twentieth century empirical psychology and evolutionary biology had begun to naturalize the notions of mind, consciousness, experience. Of course, when philosophy became linguistic it was also reflexive- but in the end isn't this situation similar to an intellect seen as an empty room where thoughts are emitted but they strike the walls and simply return back? On the other hand, in literature the words are not mere brick which build a building but they also furnish that building. Words are given a limitless expressivity which sometimes emerges even from what seems to be an unfit between the actual meaning of the word and the context in which the author uses it. Even characters are built from words instead of flesh and bones.

Literature is something entirely different than any communication- as I explained above, it provides hospitality, alterity and even the chance of an intrinsic sight. Should there be a quarrel between philosophy and literature, considering that literature seems to be the answer to today's lack of sense and philosophy lost its primate?

My opinion is that literature will be seen as a solution only to the extent that the whole of first philosophy will be redone. Jean-Luc Nancy states that the new first philosophy should be our *being singular-plural*, our existence together in this horizon inhabited by images. This does not demand that the self joins the others in terms of a unity which kills differences, but that we rely on our humanity as the essence of the world. We do not need to count on an occurrence which would give us back meaning. There isn't anything *a venir*. We are here, in this world. And we have words as the

## Essay 82

very realm of sense, meaning. The key is closing our eyes for just a second. In the silence of the images, we can think clearly. It is not images that give us anything. They only comfort the eye with the pleasure of a colorful sight which seems to tell something. But it cannot. All these images as saturated phenomena, as Jean-Luc Marion put it: in their overabundant expressivity they lose the content of expression. But in words, we can find something. And if we cannot find the God which said that there should be light and the whole world emerged, maybe we can find each other. And we can find the *other* in each other, as an emblem of alterity. There are countless worlds which await, hidden in words, hidden between covers, pages, rows... In the end, the whole world can be seen as a book, and we are all just words hiding stories, needing to be discovered. If we would rely on each other, we would not hide beyond images, beyond routines, chores... If we could see each other as a community and not as lot of consumers dwelling a certain place, we would stop looking for images and we would redo the sense. Maybe communicating. Maybe reading. Maybe even writing.

If this first philosophy cannot be restituted, literature will remain only a pale shadow in comparison with the images: bright, colorful and simply offering themselves.

### Conclusions

At the end of this 4 hours while I was writing this essay, I started to think about all the words that died while I was here. They died because they were only said, not heard, not understood, not given sense. They died because they were ignored. They died because people chose to simply wave at each other, this gesture-image replacing any communication. They died because people chose to watch TV shows instead of reading. They died, yet they are here.

My hope is that these words will be awaked. My hope is that literature will save us, teaching us what authentic communication is. And that we will, in the end, not just be here in this world, but be singular-plural, perceiving each other as emblems of alterity and not as mere images.