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POETRY AS A PARABLE

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The article examines the evolution of the understanding of poetry as a specific variety of the language arts. Based on materials from Spanish, Russian, and French poetic discourses, the article reviews the analysis of the essence of poetry, and it recapitulates poetry's systematic interpretation in the works of scholars from different countries and periods.

Key words: poetry, metaphor, parable, interpretation, poetic function.

Jorge Luis Borges, who might have been the only blind person in the world that knew about parables, gave us one about the “Yellow Emperor” [10]. I want to retell it briefly. After having seen the Emperor's palace, after having crossed with him many luminous rivers in sandal-wood canoes, and after having sacrificed a turtle to break the spell of a labyrinth finding a way out, the poet read a brief poem at the foot of the next to the last tower of the palace. This short composition is the one that gave him both immortality and death. The text is lost. Some say it was only one verse, some say only one word. But the true and incredible fact is that the poem contained the enormous palace, entirely and in detail, with every single piece of porcelain, and with the drawings on every piece, and the sunsets, and all the sad and happy moments of the glorious dynasties of men, gods and dragons that had ever lived there. The Yellow Emperor proclaimed that the poet had taken the palace away from him, and the iron sword of the executioner cut off the life of the poet. There are others that say that the story was different. Since two equal things cannot exist in the world at the same time, it was enough for the poet to recite the poem in order to make the palace disappear. All these legends are speculations, and the truth of the matter is: the poet was a slave of the Emperor and he died like one. His poem was forgotten because it deserved to be forgotten, and his descendants, who will never be able to find it, still look for the one word that contains the entire universe.

To the readers of poetry (the poets themselves, serious scholars, graduate students, university professors, and so on) poetry often seems to be like the enchanted palace of

the “Yellow Emperor”, an entire universe deserving of explanation and containment by means of only one word. Following are some examples of these attempts to find that word:

1) Poetry “lives from the metaphor” (Leopoldo Lugones, 1909) [16].

2) The “creation of metaphors... is the goal of the creative process” (Andrei Bely, 1909) [3].

3) Art is “thought in images”, “...this Potebnia's conclusion can be formulated as: poetry = imagery” (Viktor Shklovsky, 1916) [23].

4) Poetry is “the utterance oriented towards the expression” (Roman Jakobson, 1921) [15].

5) “We have reduced poetry to its primordial element: metaphor” (Jorge Luis Borges, 1921) [11].

6) “Poetry is today the superior algebra of the metaphors” (José Ortega y Gasset, 1925) [19].

7) “Only when a verbal work acquires poeticity, a poetic function of determinative significance, can we speak of poetry” (Roman Jakobson, 1933) [14].

8) “The language of poetry is a Ptolemaic world, one and only, outside which nothing exists, and nothing is needed”... “As soon as another voice, another's accent, the possibility of another's point of view breaks through the play of the symbol, the poetic plane is destroyed and the symbol is translated onto the plane of prose” (Mikhail Bakhtin, 1972) [4].

All of the above mentioned definitions deny poetry the virtue of the content, and most of them focus on the assumption that no poetry is possible without a trope, more specifically, a metaphor. However, in two of the poetic traditions that interest me, we can find poems with absolutely no tropes that have always been considered “poetry”. Such is the case of two examples included in all major anthologies of Russian and Spanish poetry. I am referring to the poem “Я Вас любил...” by Alexander Pushkin [22], and “No me mueve, mi Dios, para quererte...” [1], an anonymous sonnet in Spanish:

*No me mueve, mi Dios, para quererte,
el cielo que me tienes prometido;
ni me mueve el infierno tan temido
para dejar por eso de ofenderte.*

*Tú me mueves, Señor: muéveme el verte
clavado en una cruz y escarnecido;
muéveme el ver tu cuerpo tan herido;
muévenme tus afrentas y tu muerte.*

*Muéveme, en fin, tu amor, en tal manera
que aunque no hubiera cielo yo te amara
y aunque no hubiera infierno te temiera.*

*No tienes que me dar porque te quiera;
porque aunque cuanto espero no esperara,
lo mismo que te quiero te quisiera.*

This factual argument against the identification of poetry with imagery can be extended to almost all contemporary poetry, which tends to avoid metaphors as an anathema. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that serious scholars like the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset as well as the Russians Mikhail Bakhtin and Roman Jakobson, think that the task of containing a universe within a nutshell was accomplishable. Not less important is that the nutshell happens to be the notion of metaphor.

That identification, or equation, is only the fruit of the long quest for a system in literature, the notion of systematic order leading inevitably to unity, which prefers to be expressed in a univocal, axiomatic way. The first major work in the field of poetry analysis, Aristotle's *Poetics* [3] predetermined the emphasis on a system that would copy "the order of nature". The system would come out of ordering the parts of the whole, while the theory would grasp the nature of the whole. On the one side, we have to study the parts that share an essence, "the nature"; on the other side, we have to understand the inner qualities of "the nature". Since Aristotle, the scholar analysis of poetry happens to be a holistic classification that implies the existence of "essential qualities" in the poems and an essence in poetry.

Russian Formalism, represented in my quotations by Jakobson and Shklovsky, also approached literature with the understanding that knowledge of the essence explains and contains the particular facts, i.e. the actual poems or texts. In its life span, from 1916 until 1938, Russian Formalism made "device" the only hero of literary history. They developed the notion of "defamiliarization" (*ostranenie*) to explain why the device (a metaphor, a trope, or a technique) would be considered the essential element in literature. And even though the formalists moved from Shklovsky's equation "poetry = imagery" in 1916 to Jakobson's equation "poetry = poeticity = poetic function" in 1933, they never gave up on the belief that the essence of poetry existed in the form of a device. According to the formalists, and the structuralists later, what is important in literature is the disruption of practical language ("defamiliarization"). The disruption takes place when we listen or read something unusual, something out of the familiar and ordinary. Because our attention is caught by the use of a new, disruptive language, we focus on the message itself rather than on the meaning of it. Poeticity, according to Jakobson, is represented in linguistics by a projection "of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" [14]. If in practical language the words are linked syntagmatically, where by combination one word recalls another, in poetry the process is disrupted by inserting a word from the axis of selection. When I say "I am eating the bread...", the expectation is to finish the sentence with something syntagmatically motivated, by combination, like: "I am eating the bread that was on the table", or "I am eating the bread from yesterday". But the process of practical language can be disrupted by picking a word from the axis of selection, i.e. not motivated by combination, and creating something like "I am eating the bread of my hope". Thus, practical statements acquire poetic representation. A famous Jakobson's example is the statement "Our army conquered this part of the world" transformed into the paronomastic phrase "*Veni, vidi, vici*".

Bakhtin argued, fairly in my opinion, that the sole token of the poetic function was its opposition to practical language, its disruption of automatism in language ("defami-

liarization”) since for the formalists the aesthetic function was the “negation of any practical function” — in the words of Jan Mukarovsky [18]. Negation becomes the essence of poetry, and negation has universal validity as a system. In the “formal method” a denial is transformed into an ontological argument and only an apophasis is offered to us (“God may be known through what God is not”; “Poetic language may be known through what practical language is not”). If this is true, then any catchy phrase that goes against practical language becomes a poem, like in advertisement: “Nothing's bolder / Nothing's colder”; “Nobody lays a finger on my Butterfinger”; “Taste the future”, etc.

Bakhtin thought that this major methodological mistake in Russian Formalism was determined by the “belief” that the Russian futurist poets had created a new, monoglossic and ideologically self-centered, poetic language, every word of which was to be interpreted as the word of the “mythical Adam”: one and indivisible. Both Formalism in literary criticism and Futurism in poetry, believed in an old “philosopheme”: the expression of an “only language of Truth” in the form of a sole unitary language of poetry. Both Formalism and Futurism were Ptolemaic conceptions of language. Yet Bakhtin himself could not avoid the same unitary vision of poetry when developing his own theory. If in the 1920s Bakhtin explains the distinction between “practical” and “poetical” languages as a consequence of the futurist belief in the creation of a new poetic language, but in the 1970s Bakhtin adheres to the belief and makes it a central point of his theory. The essence of poetry, according to Bakhtin, is to be found in the unity of a discourse created against the diversity of discourses (“heteroglossia”) which, paradoxically, is the basic texture of language itself. Poetry, in the words of Bakhtin, is the language that is as if it were not real: “poetry, striving for maximal purity, works in its own language as if that language were unitary, the only language, as if there were no heteroglossia outside it” [4]. At the center of this work is, again, the play of the symbol in the poetic plan (the metaphor, the trope).

Curiously enough, we could add two very influential philosophers to the list of scholars that examine poetry in terms of the metaphor and the old familiar ghost of the essence of poetry. The Russian Nikolai Berdiaev wrote and published his book “The Crisis of Art” (*Krizis iskusstva*) in 1918 [8], while the Spaniard José Ortega y Gasset published his famous work *La deshumanización del arte* in 1925 [19], Both of them were attempts to explain the avant-garde movements about to replace the Russian and Spanish American symbolist schools. For Berdiaev, two were the tendencies in art at the time: the analytical and the synthetical. Representing the synthetical principle, Russian Symbolism tried to achieve the organic unity of art and the “world of nature”. On the other hand, the avant-garde schools of Cubism in painting and Futurism in poetry were the expression of the analytical aspirations that rejected any kind of organic principle. Contrary to Symbolism, in which the spiritual acquires a material representation, Futurism dematerializes matter transferring the gravitational center from Man to Matter. Man and his spiritual side are absent in the avant-garde expressions of art. In the words of Berdiaev, the failure of the avant-garde movements was that they did not recognize the levels of Being hidden behind the physical veil of the world. They rejected transcendence, and therefore they were only the representation of a process of disintegration in the physical plan.

An excellent case in point is the following example from Mayakovski's "A Cloud in Trousers" [17], where the initial metaphor of the heart as a house on fire becomes a physical reality for everybody:

*Алло!
Кто говорит?
Мама?
Мама!
Ваши сын прекрасно болен!
Мама!
У него пожар сердца.
Скажите сестрам, Люде и Оле, —
170 ему уже некуда деться.
Каждое слово,
даже шутка,
которые изрыгает обгорающим ртом он,
выбрасывается, как голая проститутка
из горящего публичного дома.*

*Люди нюхают —
запахло жареным!
Нагнали каких-то.
Блестящие!
180 В касках!
Нельзя сапожища!
Скажите пожарным:
на сердце горящее лезут в ласках.
Я сам.
Глаза наслезнённые бочками выкачу.
Дайте о ребра опереться.
Выскочу! Выскочу! Выскочу! Выскочу!
Рухнули.
Не выскочишь из сердца! [17. P. 10—11].*

In a striking parallelism with Berdiaev, Ortega y Gasset thought that the task of the artist was to create a universe that opposes the habitual world. As a consequence, the poet that knew how to "isolate himself from the surrounding (circumstance)" was the best poet. At the center of the poet's detachment from the surrounding reality was a process of stylization, or deformation of the real. The metaphor, in the conception of Ortega y Gasset, was the only tool we had to create evasion from reality. The metaphor created "imaginary reefs" among real things. But, following Ortega y Gasset, if the traditional metaphor was cast upon reality in order to embellish it, the avant-garde, on the contrary, tried to eliminate the extrapoetic support making of metaphor a *poetic res*. In the first case, the use of the metaphor was "human", because it was an idealization of the real, an intellectual abstraction of reality. In the second case, the realization of the unreal as unreal, painting the ideas instead of the things, was the expression of the "dehumanization" of art. Ortega y Gasset's conclusion is that art has lost its

transcendence, since thematically speaking has rejected its human side and its support in reality.

Both of them Ortega y Gasset and Berdiaev were right about avant-garde poetry, but for the wrong reasons. The limitations that they perceive in the new poetry are rather the limitations imposed on them by a symbolist conception of poetry. Unity and transcendence were lacking in avant-garde art for the simple reason that the avant-garde artistic movements never tried to reach them. And it is true that disintegration had found an expression in the subversion of the metaphor, but that does not mean that the new art had lost its human content. In fact, we see in the philosophers the same limitations imposed on the literary critics above mentioned; all of them had their visions shaped by the symbolist tradition. Both the philosophers and the critics were not explaining poetry. On the contrary, the *Weltanschauung* of Symbolism explains their views. The two basic philosophical principles in Symbolism were the Platonic conception of a universe divided into two different worlds and the Plotinian notion of the unity of Being in Beauty. The Platonic conception supports the need for transcendence in art, since the true reality, “the ideas”, is hidden behind this visible world [20; 21]. The Plotinian notion points out to the need for unity, since the ascension from the material to the spiritual in Man leads to a “vision” of Beauty that is at the same time the synthesis of both Man's spiritual and material sides, body and soul, Man and Nature [13]. This notion in Symbolism recovers the old motive of *Harmonia Mundi* in Romanticism. Both principles, the Plotinian and the Platonic, were incorporated by Baudelaire with his appropriation of Swedenborg's theory of “correspondances” and Fourier's theory of universal analogy [5]. Moreover, Baudelaire established the triad that would make possible the revelation of the correspondences and allegories: *les mots, les sons et les parfums*. The triad will survive throughout the entire period of the Symbolism. At the same time, Baudelaire made possible the shift from the simile to the metaphor in symbolist poetry. Both mythology and metaphor were, in the conception of the French poet, a dictionary of spiritual incarnations accessible to everybody. Metaphor, by being a visible representation of the abstract, was both the vision of Beauty that would bring harmony and unity, and an image of the abstract reality hidden behind the visible. Most topoi in symbolist poetry will spread out of Baudelaire's *Weltanschauung* principles: the role of imagination, the significance of music, the idea of poetic ascension, the use of mythology, the poet's definition as a translator of nature, the recovery of symbols through memory, the belief in *Harmonia Mundi*, the “*rêverie*”, and the notion of *Homo Duplex*. The list of poems that illustrate their existence would be long and superfluous, but we can find more than enough examples in Latin American poets like Rubén Darío, Leopoldo Lugones, José Juan Tablada, and Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera; or in Russian poets like Andrei Bely, Alexander Blok, Vladimir Soloviev, and Konstantin Balmont. Towards the end of the symbolist period, at the beginning of the 20th. Century, the general tendency was to make of a poem a big metaphor that would integrate all of its parts into a great all-inclusive image, for example, in the poems “The Stranger” (“*Neznakomka*”) [9] by Alexander Blok and “*Margarita*” [12] by Rubén Darío. In Darío's poem certain transcendence from the concrete to the abstract takes

place metaphorically, since the woman taking apart the leaves of the daisy flower, becomes herself a flower taken apart by death:

*¿Recuerdas que querías ser una Margarita
Gautier? Fijo en mi mente tu extraño rostro está,
cuando cenamos juntos, en la primera cita,
en una noche alegre que nunca volverá.*

*Tus labios escarlatas de púrpura maldita
sorbían el champaña del fino baccarat;
tus dedos deshojaban la blanca margarita,
«Sí... no... sí... no...» ¡y sabías que te adoraba ya!*

*Después, ¡oh flor de Histeria!, llorabas y reías;
tus besos y tus lágrimas tuve en mi boca yo;
tus risas, tus fragancias, tus quejas, eran mías.*

*Y en una tarde triste de los más dulces días,
la Muerte, la celosa, por ver si me querías,
¡como a una margarita de amor, te deshojó!*

The fervor and persistence of the Symbolist vision of the world in poetry reached its peak at the beginning of the 20th. Century, just when poetry and its vision of the world were about to change. In 1909, the Russian symbolist Andrei Bely criticized Pushkin, the national glory, as a poor and insignificant poet because in his works metonymy prevails over metaphor depriving the poems of any complete symbolic image [7]. Thus, Symbolism framed several years in advance the equation that will dominate poetry's interpretation for decades to come: "poetry = metaphor".

Poetry itself, however, was to reject this orderly vision of the world through the voice of the Avant-Garde. Guillaume Apollinaire said it better in his poem "La jolie rousse" [2] in what I think is an appeal to both the critics and the tradition:

*Vous dont la bouche est faite à l'image de celle de Dieu
Bouche qui est l'ordre même
Soyez indulgents quand vous nous comparez
A ceux qui furent la perfection de l'ordre.*

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В статье рассматривается эволюция представлений о поэзии как об особом виде словесного искусства. На материале испанского, русского и французского поэтического дискурса анализируется сущность поэтического творчества и систематизируется его интерпретация в трудах мыслителей различных стран и эпох.

Ключевые слова: поэзия, метафора, иносказание, притча, интерпретация, поэтическая функция.