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Research Article:

Imagining Reality: Philosophy and poetry in Ortega y Gasset

*Paolo Scotton*

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## Imagining Reality: Philosophy and poetry in Ortega y Gasset

*Paolo Scotton*

IMT Institute for Advanced Studies, Lucca, Italy

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Pensar que durante mas de treinta años – se dice pronto – he tenido día por día que soportar *en silencio, nunca interrumpido*, que muchos pseudo-intelectuales de mi país descalificaban mi pensamiento, porque «no escribía más que metáforas» – decían ellos. Esto les hacía triunfalmente sentenciar y proclamar que mis escritos no eran filosofía. ¡Y claro que afortunadamente no lo eran! si filosofía es algo que ellos son capaces de segregar. Ciertamente que yo extremaba la ocultación de la musculatura dialéctica definitoria de mi pensamiento, como la naturaleza cuida de cubrir fibra, nervio y tendón con la literatura ectodérmica de la piel donde se esmeró en poner el *stratum lucidum*. Parece mentira que ante mis escritos – cuya importancia, aparte de esta cuestión, reconozco que es escasa – nadie haya hecho la generosa observación que es, además, irrefutable, de que en ellos no se trata de algo que se da como filosofía y resulta ser literatura, sino por el contrario, de algo que se da como literatura y resulta que es filosofía.<sup>1</sup> (Ortega y Gasset, *La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva*, IX, p. 1136).

With these words the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset defended his own philosophical account in one of his most peculiar books,<sup>2</sup> *La idea de principio en Leibniz*, which he wrote at the beginning of the '40s but that would have been published only after his death, in 1958. This was the first book he wrote after the Spanish civil war and, indeed, it constituted one of his most relevant theoretical works. It represented not only an overall account of his own philosophy but, at the same time, an indirect attack against the neo-scholasticism which was spreading in the catholic regime of the new Spain designed by general Franco (See Bolado Ochoa, 2011; Álvarez Cobelas, 2004; Abellan, 2005). It is therefore of great significance, in order to comprehend the thought of the philosopher, the fact that he dedicates

numerous paragraphs of this book to elucidate the essence of the method he himself adopted in the course of his own career, defending the poetical trait which characterises his writings as an inner feature of the philosophical activity, or rather as the very grounding principle of his own philosophy.

The reasons which justify this choice can be found in several of his writings and can be traced back to his very first articles and books. Indeed, not only the philosopher engaged very often in direct discussions, analyses and critics of the works of specific writers and poets – such as Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Miguel de Unamuno, Azorín, Antonio Machado, Pio Baroja, Marcel Proust, Anatole France, Luis de Góngora, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, etc. – but he also frequently found in fictional characters the effective source of inspiration and a valid pretext for developing his own meditations. This is evidently the case of one of his most notorious books, the *Meditations on Quixote* (1914),<sup>3</sup> but the same could be said in regard of several of his most representative texts. The very strict relation among the philosophy developed by Ortega, poetry and literature was not only due to biographical reasons and in particular to the intellectual network which surrounded him and within which he played a leading role.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, more than this circumstantial cause, what has to be pointed out as the main reason underneath the philosopher's constant preoccupation for poetry – conceived both as the contents and the forms of several of his writings – is his constant research of the very nature and essence of the philosophical activity, and more generally of the humanities, compared with the other domains of human knowledge. Yet, before analysing in detail the peculiar epistemic status assigned to poetry by Ortega, it is necessary to briefly comprehend which was the context in which his reflection was produced, what the problems he was facing and which the authors who contributed to enrich his meditations.

### **The Philosophical Background**

Influenced, starting at least from his period of study in Berlin in 1905, by the theories and meditations of Georg Simmel<sup>4</sup> on the notion of culture and his relation to human existence (Simmel, *Die Krisis der Kultur*), Ortega always conceived every form of intellectual activity as a way to render intelligible the world by adding to it a sense of totality and universality that, *per se*, it did not possess and that can be rendered possible exclusively thanks to the individual interiorising process of the apparent objectivity of the products of culture (Simmel, *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie*). Thus, the merits which Ortega identifies in the thought of Simmel are in particular those of

rendering evident that culture, conceived as the whole spectrum of human intellectual activities, does possess a sort of transcendental character insofar as it invites the subject to overcome its individual limits to get in touch with an abstract totality and system of related facts and values (Ortega y Gasset, *El tema de nuestro tiempo* 580). Moreover, the preoccupation of Ortega concerning the nature and essence of humanities brought him, in particular starting from the thirties, to discover in the works of Wilhelm Dilthey a valid source in order to analyse and comprehend the peculiarity of the *Geistwissenschaften*.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, what interested Ortega the most was the constitutive role that culture should have played in the concrete life of people, constituting a vital form of reasoning which can inform and provide sense to the living of every single individual (See, in particular, Ortega y Gasset, *Guillermo Dilthey y la idea de la vida* 222-70). Thus, in the two German thinkers Ortega identified the major intellectuals who, for the first time and in the most fruitful way, had been able to comprehend that all intellectual activities in their process of abstraction and thinking do give birth to concrete and real words which play a vital role in the life of human beings, constituting the fundamental link between subjectivity and objectivity, a link which can render meaningful their existences by constructing what the Italian philosopher Antonio Banfi would have defined as the third realm of human life, i.e. culture (Banfi 7). The notion of vital reason that Ortega developed in those years constituted a reference point for all his following meditation as can be seen, for instance, by considering the manifesto of the *Institute of Humanities* he cofounded in Madrid with the collaboration of Julian Marías in 1948.<sup>7</sup> In this text Ortega defines the term “humanities” not merely as an academic classification, but rather as the whole cluster of phenomena which both pertains to human beings and affects them, therefore considering “humanities” to derive their name both by the fact that they are the result of a human investigation and by the fact that they indicate the very enquiry in the humanity of the persons involved in such an investigation (Ortega y Gasset, *Prospecto del Instituto de Humanidades* 555-58). Thus, with this concept of humanities in mind it would now be possible to comprehend more in-depth the role the philosopher assigned to poetry, and in particular to its method of enquiring, within this very ample domain.

### **The Metaphor as the Poet’s Method**

Indeed, the very use of the word “humanities” employed by Ortega in the case of the Institute’s manifesto can be said to illustrate, at least in part, his very concept of metaphor. In fact, according to the author, a metaphor is a means through which a

word which is commonly used in the everyday language acquires a new meaning insofar as it indicates a new reality. Put it differently, a word used in a metaphorical way, even if preserving the analogy with the one to which it was previously referred, focuses the attention both of the person who invented it and of those who receive it to another thing that was not previously encompassed within the term in relation to its mere use in the case of the everyday terminology. Therefore the power of a metaphor, which according to Ortega is the main feature of poetry or rather its defining essence, lies on the fact that it brings a word to a *status nascens* thanks to which it acquires a new meaning that did not previously exist in the reality but that, after the poetical invention, will exist in what he calls the *transmundo lírico*, i.e. the world of poetry which is not part of our everyday and concrete life but that still enjoys a proper ontological status (Ortega y Gasset, *Góngora: 1627-1927* 180). The ontological status of this world corresponds to the realm of humanities: it is in fact created by human reason and it springs from the vital conditions of necessities characterising all human beings to find solutions to the enigmatic and chaotic flux of their life experiences. In this process of creating a metaphor what is in particular involved is the imaginative faculty of human beings, i.e. fantasy. Now, this notion of metaphor and poetry as the more powerful expression of human imagination does not confine it to an inferior status in comparison to philosophy and science, but rather it permits to comprehend the essence of all cultural processes. Indeed, starting from these premises, Ortega forcefully argues in favour of the epistemic role of poetry in fostering human knowledge. In fact, even if poetry is substantially the domain in which metaphors are more patently used it is not the only one. Concerning the productive activity of the poet, philosopher or scientist – what we might define as the *poietic skill* – the use of fantasy and imagination is evidently fundamental for any intellectual activity insofar as it represents the necessary point of departure for the unceasing formulation of hypotheses and counterhypotheses, for the series of trial and errors that cannot be put into action without an hypothetical premise. Since for an hypothesis to be formulated it is necessary to adopt a creative way of thinking which, in a metaphorical way, abstract from the world “W”, the world as such, to imagine a possible world “W<sub>1</sub>” that could be, if  $x=x_1$ , it is evident that the poetic skill must be possessed by all the people who produce a new form of knowledge. Therefore, this transposition of terms which generates new worlds is conceived by Ortega as the basic functioning of human reason in relation to all sort of inventions (Ortega y Gasset, *La deshumanización del arte* 865-67). For this reason, poetry is thought as a valid form of knowledge, not only methodologically speaking but also in relation to its contents, insofar as it creates

new realities which do exist in a world which can be concretely inhabited not only by the author of that same world but also by all those who willingly decide to live it, for instance by moving for the time of a reading to that world created by the poet or novelist, i.e. to believe to it, even if knowing that their belief will not last forever. Moreover, the construction of a fictional world – but also and simpler of a mere fictional connection as in the case of a single metaphor – does represent a way of indicating a truth without truisms, exhibiting relations and links which will then actually exist in the *transmundo lírico*, in the cultural world of poetry. For these reasons, as far as the productive activity of the inventor is concerned, Ortega argues that: «La metáfora es un instrumento mental imprescindible, es una forma de pensamiento científico»<sup>8</sup> (Ortega y Gasset, *Las dos grandes metáforas* 505). However, the Spanish philosopher at the same time underlines also some differences between the two types of metaphor characterising respectively poetry and science which in any case share the common need of rendering clearer a concept by adapting an old word (terminology) to a new reality (living language), in order to advance in the complexity of knowledge starting from what is already known to explain a new discovery, to render accessible a concept so difficult for its novelty that it reaches the extreme limits of human thinking. In particular, whereas in the case of poetry the metaphor plays a constitutive role, insofar as the metaphor is adopted for its own sake or for the beauty of a poem; on the contrary, in the case of science, the metaphor has an instrumental role insofar as it aims at elucidating a technical concept. This represents a teleological difference between the two. Moreover, there is also a difference in the scope among the two: whereas poetry use metaphors in particular to link two concrete things and at the end realises the identity it imagined in the mind both of the poet and the reader, philosophy and science are concerned with abstract entities and, due to the instrumental use of the metaphor, at the end this process implies that once the concept is grasped, the metaphor can be abandoned. However, these differences do not discredit the use of metaphor – and therefore of a poetic thinking – within the domain of philosophy and science, insofar as the capability of abstracting from an entity to another and to find useful or powerful connections and links is an unavoidable prerogative for all those who are engaged in an intellectual activity. Poetry, as philosophy and science, is therefore a form of scientific knowledge and metaphor constitutes the basic method adopted in the course of any intellectual enquiry.

### Poetry and scientific progress

So far it has been taken into consideration in particular the *poietic skill* involved in the scientific research which poetry and its metaphorical method are deemed to contribute to foster. Indeed, it has to be pointed out the fact that poetry plays a very important epistemological function not only in relation to the artist who produces it, but also in relation to the enjoyment of its readers or, to put it differently, to the knowledge acquired by common people thanks to its method of enquiry. For instance, in the case of those who are engaged in the reading or understanding of a poem they are experiencing a reality which completely absorbs them for a period of time, representing the world *sub specie poieseos*. This means that they are completely aware of the fact that what they are reading is the product of a human thought and does not represent *per se* the reality. However, they accept to believe to it unconditionally as long as they accept to live in that world they share with the poet. This attitude constitutes something more than the notorious willing “suspension of disbelief” theorised by Coleridge since, according to Ortega, the world of poetry does not represent a falsity that – being untrue – cannot be taken seriously into account. On the contrary, this new representation is thought as another perspective and a different point of view giving birth to an interior world which possesses the same ontological and epistemic status of the real, everyday world which we experience through the lenses of our senses arranged according to the dictates of the scientific research and discoveries (Ortega y Gasset, *Ideas y Creencias* 673-77). What distinguishes poetry from philosophy or science is therefore only the fact that the first explicitly accept to be considered as the expression of an invention, of a person’s idea; whereas the second would aspire to represent an objective and impersonal point of view. However, both the methodology (the metaphor) and the role played by these different disciplines in the life of people are the same. In fact, since they both aim to constitute interior worlds which render possible for a person to live a meaningful life they similarly contribute to imagine reality within the borders of the everyday world (684-87). According to the Spanish philosopher, both poetry and philosophy construct new worlds in which is then possible to live, in the sense that they can sustain the life of human beings by providing them with a systematic and coherent account of believable concepts, theories and norms which can help them in their concrete living experiences. Thus, considering poetry as a form of human knowledge sharing the same ontological and epistemic status of philosophy and science invites every person to consider the whole domain of culture as the product of a human activity and, therefore, to think to each scientific description as constituting exclusively an *orbe imaginario* and not the reality *per se*. As a

consequence, this spread awareness suggests that every presumed objectivity can be put into question, discussed and replaced by a new description of the reality which can be more meaningful: for this reason the poetical frame of mind, the reality seen *sub specie poieseos* as in the case of the enjoyment of poetry, constitutes a significant spur to scientific development. In fact, this particular perspective helps comprehending the momentary and transient nature of each and every product of culture that always acquires its meaning in relation to the historical condition in which it was developed. This feature of human knowledge is what Ortega called as the *historical reason*.<sup>9</sup> Thus, since every representation of the world, as in the case of poetry, lasts only for the time it is believed by those who enjoy it, this means that if considered in its radicalism the theory of historical reason implies that every variation in the hierarchies among disciplines and in the ways in which they are expressed constitutes a variation in the very same perception of the reality given in a particular period of human history.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, poetry conceived as a way of reading and understanding the world constitutes a fruitful means thanks to which it is possible to put into question a theory, even a philosophical or scientific one, when this starts to lose its significance in relation to the purposes for which it was produced, thus contributing to its replacement with a new one.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, this investigation on the ontological and epistemic status of poetry has exhibited the reasons why the methodology used and the results obtained by a poetical way of thinking share several communalities with the ones of philosophy and science. Poetry can therefore be said to represent a true and scientific vision of the world, without pretending to be the truth. This self-proclaimed limitation – which poetry contribute to disclose as an inner character of any human enquiry and reasonable way of thinking such as in the case of philosophy – permits to consider all the disciplines encompassed within the humanities, in the meaning applied to them by Ortega, as partial, relative and debatable knowledge. This confers to them a hint of uncertainty that, however, does not end in a tragedy: on the contrary, this partiality permits to consider all culture and its products – i.e. civilisation – as a tentative way of assigning a proper meaning to the lives of human beings, knowing that this activity would never be tragic, but rather will resemble to a playful preoccupation unceasingly open to its own reconstruction.

Moreover, the analysis of the concept of metaphor has shown that philosophy shares with poetry its same tendency to create new ideas thanks to an operation of

transposition of meaning which opens up new perspectives on reality. Therefore, the same *poietic skill* possessed by the poet is required to the philosopher who would have to invent her own style. This, according to the principles of the historical reason, should be in accordance to the moods of the time, to the philosophical genre of an epoch, that is, to the way in which the ideas are produced and spread in particular contexts and particular times. Consequently, philosophy and poetry can be thought as two declinations of a same method and aim of enquiry which only differs in the two cases due to the fact that the description purported by philosophy is usually, but only contingently, considered to be more akin to truth than the other.

#### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> «Consider that, for more than thirty years, every day I have had to bear *in silence, never interrupted*, that several pseudo-intellectuals of my homeland banned my thought because «he did not write but metaphors» – they said. This brought them to triumphantly sentence and proclaim that my writings were not philosophy. And it is clear that, fortunately, they were not this! If philosophy is something that these people are able to limit and segregate. Evidently I took to the extreme the camouflage of the musculature of my thought's defining dialectic, as nature take for covering fibre, nerve and tendon with the ectodermic literature of the skin, where it took great care of putting the *stratum lucidum*. It seems a falsehood that, considering my writing – whose importance, beside this question, I recognize to be scant – no one had generously noticed that, irrefutably, this is not a matter of something which is presented as philosophy and ends up by being literature, but rather the contrary: of something that is presented as literature and ends up by being philosophy». My translation.

<sup>2</sup> As Julian Marías (1983, II, p. 447), one of most representative disciples of Ortega, wrote: «Este libro[...] es a última hora el más personal, el que más se parece a una confesión, con una significación autobiográfica – porque se trata de una vida convencionalmente definida por la filosofía».

<sup>3</sup> On an overview and interpretation of the Meditations of Quixote see, for instance, Villacañas (2004); Carpintero (2005); Cerezo Galán (2007); Pini (2012).

<sup>4</sup> On the intellectual circle surrounding Ortega in Madrid during this life, and for comprehending the extension of his legacy in the overall succeeding intellectual life of Spain see, for instance, Abellan (2005); Zamora Bonilla (2002); Padilla (2007).

<sup>5</sup> The important role played of the German thinker in the philosophy of Ortega is autobiographically testified, for instance in Ortega, *Jeorg Simmel*, III, p. 742.

<sup>6</sup> On the influence of Dilthey on the philosophy Ortega, see, in addition to the many direct references of the Spanish philosopher, for instance Gadamer (1985) and Lévêque (2008).

<sup>7</sup> However, Ortega's interest in providing a definition of culture represents one of his constant preoccupation from his very youth and radicalised during the following years in works such as *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, *Misión de la Universidad*, *En torno a Galileo*, *Ideas y creencias* and others. See, for instance San Martín (1998); López Cambronero (2003); Monfort Prades (2011); Garcia Nuño (2014); Scotton (2014).

<sup>8</sup> «Metaphor is an indispensable mental instrument, it is a form of scientific thinking». My translation

<sup>9</sup> For this notion see in particular Ortega (1936); an interesting analysis of the relevance of this notion within a sociological framework is offered, for instance, by Graham (2001).

<sup>10</sup> «El frente común religión-mito-poesía *sensu homerico* consiste, pues, en una interpretación puramente imaginaria del Mundo y a ella habría el hombre de acogerse definitivamente si no hubiera existido filosofía». Ortega, *La idea de principio en Leibniz*, IX, p. 1151

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#### AUTHOR INFORMATION:

Paolo Scotton is a PhD Candidate in Political History at IMT Institute for Advanced Studies, Lucca, Italy. Apart from editing a volume (*Prima e dopo il Leviatano*, Padova: Cleup, 2014) he has published articles in various journals such as *Lo Sguardo*, *Rivista di Filosofia*, and *History of Education and Children's Literature*. His areas of interest include Political Philosophy, History of Political Thought, Theory of Literature, Philosophy of Education, and so on.