

Differentia: Review of Italian Thought

Number 8 *Combined Issue 8-9 Spring/Autumn*

Article 22

1999

Metaphor and Metaphysics: on E. Grassi

Barbara Godorecci

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia>

Recommended Citation

Godorecci, Barbara (1999) "Metaphor and Metaphysics: on E. Grassi," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*. Vol. 8 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol8/iss1/22>

This document is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* by an authorized editor of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu, hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu.

Metaphor and Metaphysics

Barbara Godorecci

Review-essay of Ernesto Grassi, *La metafora inaudita* (Palermo: Aesthetica edizione 1990); *La preminenza della parola metaforica. Heidegger, Meister Eckhart, Novalis* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1987); *Umanesimo e retorica. Il problema della follia*. (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1988).

What relationship exists between metaphor—the poetic word—and truth? Wherein lies the significance of the metaphorical word [*la parola metaforica*] in philosophical discourse?

These questions are of central concern in three recently published books by Ernesto Grassi: *La preminenza della parola metaforica. Heidegger, Meister Eckhart, Novalis*, a collection of four lectures delivered by Grassi in Italy in 1985 and 1986; *Umanesimo e retorica. Il problema della follia*, an Italian translation of the original English text written in collaboration with Maristella Lorch, entitled *Folly and Insanity in Renaissance Literature* (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval & Early Renaissance Studies, 1986); and *La metafora inaudita*, nine essays accompanied by an extensive bibliography of Grassi's work prepared by Emilio Hidalgo-Serna. All three texts promote Grassi's urgent and passionate interest in the metaphor as our means to knowledge: a poetic response to rationalistic explanations of being and knowing. The dynamic relationship existing among these texts results in part of a formal phenomenon, i. e., the intersection and re-presentation of several studies in *La metafora inaudita* which first appeared—in other forms and under different guises—in *Umanesimo e retorica* or *La preminenza della parola metaforica* (see preface in *La metafora inaudita*), works to create a palimpsest of correspondences which, by its very nature, constrains us to read "through" the texts rather than treat them in an isolated or sequential manner.

Traversing Grassi's texts compels the reader to take note of and focus upon the set of points to which the philosopher repeatedly returns. Characteristic, for example, is Grassi's ongoing discussion of the ontological difference, the fact that Being is neither logically deducible from beings nor rationally identifiable (*La prem.*, 16). "Being is secret and at the same time speaks" (17, my trans.): emphasis falls

on the contradictory nature of Being, its paradoxical essence, and on the assertion that Being does not abide by, is not defined by, does not respond to, belies the identity principle of logic (whereby $A = A$). For these reasons, Grassi sustains, "every rational metaphysics precludes itself from solving the problem of Being" (*La prem.*, 28—my translation of "ogni metafisica razionale si preclude ogni soluzione del problema dell'Essere").

The language of man parallels Being's own nature. Indeed, the problem of Being compels us to recognize the original non-rational character of language (16), itself defiant of the identity principle. Thus it is that "beings" are determined not by a logical process, but rather by metaphor (*La prem.*, 41), and herein the philosophical significance of metaphor is revealed. "Certainly not the metaphor as a figure of speech" (*La metafora*, 9), as a mere transferral of meaning from A to B; certainly not an "external covering" ("integumentum") enveloping the truth—a tentative disguise to cloak a fixed and abstract entity—as traditional logic and rationalist thought would have it (*La prem.*, 12). Metaphor *is* instead the paradox of "Being" and "beings," the poetic experience of reality as the contemporaneity of identity and difference: witness to and manifestation of the ontological difference. An echo in a canyon, its re-sounding is but an intimation of the voice of the other, though the voice persists unheard [inaudita], the word unpronounced (*La metafora*, 9). What remains is the profound impression of the abyss before us, and an unsettling yet urgent need to respond to the "abysmal appeal" [l'appello abissale]. The result of our experience is nothing less than "meraviglia" (cf. *La prem.*, 47), and it is ingenuity [ingegno] that permits us to find [invenire] a way, to find ourselves in the situation of responding to the call (cf. *Umanesimo*, 26-30).

The philosophically speculative value of the metaphorical word and of rhetoric in general is an assertion which openly conflicts with the Western rationalist tradition in philosophy, wherein the pre-eminence of logic, and the equation "rationality = reality" are founding axioms. Historically, the metaphorical word has been afforded no space within these parameters, for it "has no basis in reasons ('Grund,' a founding chain of 'because's'), no 'grounding' in logical truths" (cf. *La prem.*, 34). It has been because of this, that metaphor, the poetic word, and poetry, metaphorical thought, have been limited to the field of literature and excluded from the realm of philosophy by thinkers such as Kant, Fichte, and Hegel (cf. *La metafora*, 97-101), among others. Metaphor (as it is here intended by Grassi) represents a rejection of the identity principle and the notion of a fixed, atemporal referentiality in that it manifests the "appello abissale" [*Ab-grund*] in an ever-changing, indeed "ground-breaking" manner. A "clearing" [*schiarita*] in the *selva oscura*, an open space which has been created by the gathering together of what was all in a line: "this 'opening' is not obtained by means of

a rational process but only through metaphorical thought and language" (*Umanesimo*, 117, my translation). This opening is the stage of the theater of the world: a space allowing the meaning of beings "to manifest itself through *praxis*" (cf. *La metafora*, 52), a setting "wherein only the metaphorical and metamorphic 'representation' of human history takes place" (117, my translation). It is upon this stage that metaphor responds to metaphysics.

One of the major thrusts of Grassi's efforts in these three works is to illustrate the philosophical significance of rhetoric vis-à-vis Humanism, specifically, those Humanist texts expressing a non-platonic point of view, e. g., the writings of Salutati (*De laboribus Herculis*), Bruni (*Epistolarum libri VIII et al.*), Alberti (*Momus*) and Erasmus (*The Praise of Folly*), to name several. These are the same texts whose philosophical value was discounted—precisely because of their ruptured ties with Platonism—both by Cartesian rationalism and German idealism, who polemically positioned themselves against any notion of a metaphorical philosophy.

One central figure in contemporary philosophical thought to publicly reject Humanism in much the same manner as the aforementioned is Heidegger, with whom Grassi takes issue in all three of his books. The issue concerns the German philosopher's twofold historical thesis expressing his position on Humanism and his criticism of traditional metaphysics. *In nuce*, Humanism is considered by Heidegger as either an effort to "christianize" platonism and neo-platonism, or as a vain attempt at a renewed anthropology (*La prem.*, 19). Based upon this, the Heideggerian position as expressed in the *Letter on Humanism* (published by Grassi for the first time in 1947), has historically been to deny Humanism and Humanist writings any speculative significance. Moreover, Heidegger's steadfast stance can be regarded within the broader context of his radical criticism of traditional metaphysics, i. e., his accusation that Western thought—from Plato on—has ignored the ontological difference and has therefore created a metaphysics based on beings and not Being. It is apparent, then, for this reason as well that Humanism and Humanist writings fall within the scope of Heidegger's general criticism, and are therefore viewed as being part of the metaphysical tradition.

Neither did Heidegger ever espouse the understanding or use of metaphor as proposed by Grassi; instead, he denied that metaphor possessed any philosophical function in that it was principally a vessel for the transferral of meaning from one term to another (*La prem.*, 28). Metaphor was regarded by Heidegger as falling within the confines of traditional metaphysics: evidence for such an assertion could be found in the very fact that both "metaphor" and "metaphysics" share in common the preposition [above, beyond], which in itself "already implies a distinction between sensible and non-sensible, a distinction which

constitutes, from the very outset, the structure of traditional metaphysics" (*La prem.*, 30 my translation). In this way, the same platonic dualism born "of the distinction made between the sensible world and the *mundus intelligibilis*—quintessential to traditional metaphysics—is judged to be the basis for metaphor as well (*La prem.*, 30). From this perspective, the role of metaphor is to call our attention and lead us to a truth which transcends the word, a reality beyond the "here" and "now."

Grassi passionately responds to Heidegger's historical thesis on all accounts. His primary rebuttal is that the German philosopher had never ventured an interpretation of those Humanist texts which he so rejected in his *Letter on Humanism*, thus we remain with insufficient proof regarding the declarations of the historical thesis (*La prem.*, 19). On the other hand, Grassi takes on the challenge of close textual analyses in his three books. His attention to Humanist texts is present throughout these writings (ostensively in *Umanesimo*), providing us with a generous and indeed compelling number of examples (among which the four texts mentioned earlier) that convincingly counter those accusations that the problem of the ontological difference had been ignored by the Humanists. He cites Coluccio Salutati, who in his *De laboribus Herculis* "'affirms that *scientia* has its origin in the metaphorical activity consisting of the discovery, the invention (*inventio*, in the sense of *invenire*) of *similitudines* which identify, time after time, the ever-changing meaning of beings" (*La metafora*, 19, my translation); he cites Leonardo Bruni, whose reflections (and translations) deal directly with the preeminence of the problem of language: the meaning of the word related to "context" and "situation" (its own historicalness), the refutation of the word as the fruit (and expression) of rational thought (*La prem.*, 22). And then come Erasmus and Leon Battista Alberti who, in *The Praise of Folly* and *Momus* respectively, reveal the inadequacy of the rational process and therefore of traditional metaphysics through their own mythical philosophizing [*filosofare mitico*], wherein metaphorical thought and language are recognized as having a primary function. It is in these two texts that we become aware of the fact that "the sacred fire of the gods given to men by Prometheus is not reason but rather metamorphic capability" (*Umanesimo*, 116, my translation).

Grassi however does not limit himself to these texts alone, but rather spans the centuries examining the writings of a vast and varied array of other thinkers such as Aristotle, Pseudo Longinus, Meister Eckhart and Nikolaus Krebs, as well as "literary" figures the likes of Leopardi, Novalis, Nerval, and Proust.

His consideration of the Aristotelian definition of tragedy, the "sublime" in Pseudo Longinus, Meister Eckhart's negative theology and "the ineluctable imposition of 'the word' as brought forth by

Nikolaus Krebs [Nicola da Cusano], supports his contention (in opposition to the Heideggerian thesis) that in both ancient and medieval thought there was indeed an awareness of the ontological difference, and that this appeared along with the ontological tradition (cf. *La metafora*, 61-75).

Equally sensitive to the ontological difference and the pre-eminence of metaphorical language is the latter group of personalities with whom Grassi deals. Of particular interest is Giacomo Leopardi's foundationless perception of reality, whereby reality ("un nulla") is judged to be nothing other than (vain) illusions (*La metafora inaudita*, 44). There is, however, no pessimism in this Leopardi (indeed, the poet "polemicizes against all pessimism" [44]), for illusions (illudersi, inludersi) are the key, our means for entering into and experiencing the *ludus*, the existential "game" (46).

Novalis also speaks in terms of the "playful" [*ludico*] character of language, and of our necessity to play (action, *praxis*) at the game of language. Grassi adds, a propos of Novalis' considerations on the word: "Precisely because being is not attainable by means of beings' rational identification, it reveals itself through the historicalness of the game of language [*del gioco della parola*]" (110, my translation), that is, through the metaphorical word. Novalis playfully muses: "Man: a metaphor." (110, my translation).

For Nerval, passion is the most powerful and urgent expression of the "abysmal appeal," the paradoxical experiencing of both the world of reality and of dreams—of identity and difference. Neither subjective nor psychological in nature, it is instead "the experience of a reality which is abysmal, mysterious" (123), and which manifests itself vis-à-vis the word.

We encounter in Marcel Proust a most unlikely "philosopher" but, as Grassi sustains, a most resoundingly philosophical text. Proust's "myth" is his own passionate response to the abysmal appeal, "his suffering of the temporality of beings" and his questioning of whether one can arrive at a more profound reality not, however, by transcending the moment, but rather by urgently adhering to the "here" and "now," through the metaphorical word (78-79).

In order to realize this task Proust writes a phenomenology, he describes an existential experience, not in the manner of Hegel, by illustrating the dialectic process of rational thought, but rather by shedding light upon the original abysmal character of reality, which [. . .], thanks to the poetic word, makes man appear in all of his historicalness. (78, my translation)

We now arrive at our point of departure, which is best summed up by Ernesto Grassi's own questioning: "Here is the problem: does the recognition of the lack of pre-eminence of the rational word permit

[us] to speak of the legitimacy and philosophical function of the metaphorical word?" (*La prem.*, 27, my translation). Put differently: do these texts convincingly present metaphor's response to metaphysics?

Grassi's presentation and discussion of the ontological difference, of the impossibility to arrive at Being through beings, i.e., by means of logical deduction, is compelling. The philosopher develops and argues his point rigorously, taking care to consider and examine both sides of the question through his own analyses of texts representing the metaphysical tradition (Kant, Fichte, and Hegel in particular) as well as those which speak for the "metaphorical tradition."

Furthermore, the abundance of textual evidence cited also serves to powerfully rebut Heidegger's historical claim that from Plato on, the Western philosophical tradition has ignored the problem of the ontological difference. Indeed, by demonstrating the philosophical worth of so many texts which had previously been "relegated" to the field of "literature," Grassi creates a philosophical counter-canon, calling into question the very definition of "philosophy," and the criteria by which a text is judged to be either "in" or "out."

In these three texts the philosopher is both explicit and painstakingly thorough in his exposition on the nature of the metaphor (paradox, "the logic of identity and difference") as the expression and manifestation of beings' participation in Being. The most intriguing development in Grassi's thinking on metaphor is expressed in *La metafora inaudita*, and concerns all that is suggested in the title, namely, the fact that the metaphor for which we search, that "sublime" word which will capture Being, "a word capable of offering a definite response to our every question" (*La metafora*, 9-10) is unheard of, never pronounced. The outrageous [*inaudito*] silence of a metaphor which is forever displaced, "subject" of an incessant translation [*traslazione incessante*], is both the sense and the es-sence of the paradox of Being and beings.

There is one unsettling problem which arises upon reading these texts for the first time, and that is to question Grassi's apparent objective to establish the preeminence of the metaphorical word (as the title of one work suggests) over the rational word: is not this urgency for the former to "take its rightful place" by overcoming the latter merely an exchange of vessels? Does the philosopher fall into the trap of desiring to "change places" with the dominant philosophical tradition?

One could suggest that there are textual indicators to this effect, citing, for instance, Grassi's style, which recalls a mode of presentation typical of the traditional Western philosophical treatise (chapters, numbered paragraphs, analytical organization and disposition). Or, one might object that Grassi's lexicon (e. g., "contradiction," "object/subject," "new objectivity," "priority," "origin"), particularly

in the two earlier works, is better suited and traditionally a part of the lexicon of logic and rationalist thought. These details do indeed catch the reader's eye at the outset.

Grassi's texts, however, ask to be read and re-read. And the more they are read and read again, the less "apparent" the question of "trading places" becomes. To emphasize the pre-eminence of the metaphorical word is *not* equal to the insistence upon the priority of the rational word, precisely because the metaphor is "inaudita," constantly displaced thus ever-changing, rhetorical. Hence what appears to be identical is but an intimation of identity and difference.