

Demanding the impossible? Semioethics, ethnophilology and the fourth humanism

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The title of this small tribute to Augusto Ponzio intentionally recalls that of a classic book on anarchy written by Peter Marshall (2010). The reason why I am suggesting this correlation can be traced in Ponzio's epistemological approach to the human and to *human*, which he considers as a valutive and not as a descriptive adjective. On many occasions, he has pointed out that human thoughts, words and gestures are signs which are autonomous from need and necessity, and which are characterized by desire, inventiveness, creativity, nonfunctionality (Ponzio 1990). For him, "the human being emerges as an end in itself, as a value that cannot be reduced to the status of means" (Petrilli 2005). This point of view puts him far from those semiologists and semioticians who tend to analyse human products as well in terms of functionality and of systems of signs: I would say that, especially for a semiotician, this is the expression of a *libertarian* and *irreverent* idea, and I believe that it should be appreciated exactly for this quality, which is at the very origins of the concept of science (Alinei 2010; Benozzo 2012b).

Ponzio's attitude towards semiotics is an attempt to bring it back to its original (medical) capability of auscultation of symptoms, and the name he gives to this renewed approach is *semioethics*: one could define semioethics as a perspective in the study of signs which is characterized by *care for life* in a global, destructive and polluting perspective (as this expression is understood by Posner 2000). In other words, "semiotics understood as semioethics can provide the necessary conceptual tools to develop a capacity for listening to the symptoms of semiotic pollution and its widespread harm to life" (Ponzio and Petrilli 2011a: 340).

Of course this way of perceiving semiotics affects the perception of the discipline itself and of its possible future, but its first consequence is to carry out a critical function towards contemporary society, mass-medial communication and industry information.

There are several affinities between this renewed perception of the semiotician as a semioethician and the attempt to perceive the figure of the future philologist as an ethnophilologist (Benozzo 2007; 2010a; 2011). Among many others, I could recall the following ones:

semioethics and ethnophilology as 'undisciplines': the undisciplined approach as opposed to the interdisciplinary one;

- semioethics and ethnophilology as humanized perspectives*: the idea of humanized undisciplines as opposed to the outdated idea of Humanities;
- semioethicians and ethnophilologists as militant intellectuals*: the idea of scholars who perceive themselves as creative parts and performers in the traditions they study, as opposed to the idea of intellectuals as interpreters (and sometimes as owners and magistrates) of traditions which are kept at a critical (or uncritical?) distance;
- semioethics and ethnophilology as un-institutionalized approaches*: the lack of institutionalisation as opposed to the institutionalized academic statute of semiotics and philology, and thus as a fertile ground where a plurality of practices engaged in a wide variety of contexts can be experimented;
- semioethics and ethnophilology as de-territorialized undisciplines*: the dialogic, plurilingual, multi-voiced respect for the multiple space of voices, contrasts and resonances of contemporary multimediality and multiculturalism, as opposed to the often one-sided, monolingual, out-to-date and formalizing perspective of traditional philology and semiotics;
- semioethics and ethnophilology as symptomatological undisciplines*: the comprehension and auscultation of texts, against any reification and fetishism of signs, in their way of being symptoms and traces (of memory, of thoughts, of reality, of communication among humans) as opposed to the perception and misunderstanding of texts as semiotic textures or structures subordinated to our hermeneutical preconceptions;
- semioethicians and ethnophilologists as active interpretants*: the active participation of the interpreter/interpretant (both in the sense of “identifying-interpretant” and of “answering-comprehension-interpretant”) as opposed to the neutral, dispassionate, serial analyses of traditional philology and semiotics;
- semioethics and ethnophilology as possible ways of reconciliation with communities*: the attempt of becoming cultural instruments and signs of our communities, as opposed to the self-referential attitude of those philologists and semioticians who have lost contact with real things.

Starting from these assumptions, semioethicians and ethnophilologists should claim a crucial role in what I have proposed to call the *fourth humanism* (Benozzo 2010a: 1-3; 2012a). If it is true that (following Lévi-Strauss 1973) the first humanism corresponds (in the Renaissance) with the discovery of antiquity, the second one (in 18th and 19th centuries) with the new frontiers opened by geographical explorations, and the third one (starting from the early 19th century) with encounter with ‘primitive’ societies, it is coherent to think that—in this progressive consciousness of our geographical and historical extensions—a new humanism has to deal with the universe of complexity and uncertainty, with the resonances of multimedial, multicultural, and multiethnic traditions. Moreover, the fourth humanism confronts itself with the ticklish investigations of cultural biology, with the perspectives opened in the last decade by the neo-evolutionistic and neo-Darwinian theories, and with the interpretation of cultures perceived as viral phenomena and studied with instruments which are similar to the ones used by epidemiology and by the genetics of parasites. It is of course a matter of responsibilities, and pertains to our determination of going beyond the traditional boundaries of our habitual fields of enquiry.

Ponzio's insistence on "the dialogic relation between one unique single individual and another", on "the face-to-face relation without the mask of genre" and "without the mask of type, category, class, role, membership, belonging, nationality" (Ponzio, Petrilli and Punday 2008: 225), and his preference – both in everyday life and in his job as a professor and a writer – for encounters between absolute, autonomous and self-sufficient alterities (as opposed to the myths of identity, identities and of the defence of identities, cf. Ponzio 2009), has precisely to do with his constant reflection on the responsibilities of intellectuals in the contemporary and future worlds. His proposal is clear: the effective relation (not only of an intellectual!) with the other "is a relation of unindifference where the other's difference is not at all indifferent to me": to reach this condition "we need to cancel all indifferent differences, as in a love relation: membership, age, religion and even sex", and become interested "in the other's absolute difference with respect to which there is no possibility of being indifferent" (Ponzio, Petrilli and Punday 2008: 229-239). This is a statement which one could cite as *a possible definition of anarchy*, and which is in fact similar to the following one: "anarchists do not have a naïve or crude view of freedom: their aspiration to create a free society is based on the cancellation of differences and on respect for others, without prejudices, as individuals" (Damico 1987: 44).

Of course I am not arguing that philologists and semioticians who work in the fourth humanism, and thus perceive themselves as ethnophilologists and semioethicians, are or must be libertarian scholars: I am stating that their mimetic interpretation of things is in its essence an anti-dogmatic and unprejudiced tool for facing the challenges of contemporaneity, in order "to work for a better world" (Ponzio and Petrilli 2011b: 385; see also Benozzo 2010c).

This last sentence can be perceived as a rebellious assertion of resistance against the eclipse of utopianism among intellectuals (Jacoby 1999), and seems to indicate that semioethicians (and ethnophilologists) should consider themselves as guarantors of utopia. In other words, I propose to celebrate the 70 years of Augusto Ponzio as a valuable opportunity given to us for recognizing that his several essays and books do not deal simply with problems of knowledge, but with "problems of knowledge and freedom" (Chomsky 1972). Quoting again Marshall (2010: i), I would then venture to recapitulate Ponzio's philosophy with the following unambiguous and urgent appeal: *Be realistic: demand the impossible!*

Thank you Augusto, and *buon compleanno!*

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