

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HERMES: THE MEANING OF HERMENEUTICS AND SYMBOLISM

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INTRODUCTION

The meaning of hermeneutics is not something exclusive to hermeneutics; it is not something the hermeneutical enterprise dominates, masters, or even manages. Rather, hermeneutics must understand itself as an activity at the behest of meaning, which it is incapable to exhaust or contain. The meaning of hermeneutics therefore does not belong to hermeneutics, but, on the contrary, hermeneutics belongs to meaning. Its meaning is that which, in one way or another, always pursues and persecutes human beings, who, as *interpreting or symbolic animals*, generate a multiplicity of cultural languages, wherein meaning is configured and articulated. Hermeneutics is thus limited to a realization of what humans already do—whether explicitly or implicitly; actively or passively—in their individual and collective lives: a search for meaning.¹

Now, philo-sophers love and pursue a forever-elusive wisdom, even though, according to Plato, just by the fact of pursuing it, we are guided by it, at least with Socrates and Nicolas of Cusa, to the point of *docta ignorantia*. In parallel with this and likewise in the search for meaning, be it existential or hermeneutical, what we really find is meaninglessness—otherwise it would have been not a search but possession. Akin to the love of wisdom, the search for meaning is endless; it is an infinite adventure. It does not culminate in meaning. Rather, its evident result is meaninglessness, since, without the felt disquietude of the latter there would not have been any search whatsoever. This search may even lead us to the understanding that human meaning consists in assuming and accepting onto-logical, effective, patent meaninglessness, so as to thrust it open to ontologico-symbolic, affective, latent meaning. Resignation appears here as the possibility of re-signation [*re-signación*] (Vattimo) and of as-signment [*a-signación*], given that the resigned acceptance of the absence of absolute, powerful, and explicit meaning makes possible the acknowledgement of the humanness of our interpretations as such and the assignment to life and the universe of a plurality of linguistic, symbolic, relative or relational, meanings. The acceptance of this plurality implies that neither multiple meanings nor

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oft-demonized meaninglessness [*sinsentido*] should be excluded but, rather, should be respected and accepted [*consentido*], taken up into democratic and civil coexistence.

The meaning distilled in hermeneutics, which we view as one of such “distillation strategies” generated by human beings, is not, like the humans themselves—who are “defective animals” (Nietzsche) or “lacking” beings, “non-adapted to their environment” (*Gehlen*)—a powerful and absolute meaning; on the contrary, it is weak and injured, unstable and requiring assistance. Meaning is not exactly real, but symbolic. It does not reveal itself immediately but is relational and needs hermeneutics. Meaning [*sentido*] is in need of being protected and accepted [*consentido*] by the human psyche, which includes both consciousness and the unconscious.²

We are, thus, in front of the “hermeneutical circle,” amplified as a “cosmic circle.” Psyche, as Aristotle knew full well, is a part of *physis*, insofar as it is subject to movement. And the unconscious, as Jung reminds us, has its roots in the biological-instinctive and its archetypes, even though it is capable of generating consciousness, which, initially relying on a web of mythico-symbolic images, gradually distances itself from this matrix and, affirming itself, detaches itself from its origins to the point of opposing the universe and opening in this tension and in this new relation the possibility for the event of meaning.

There is no being without meaning, and, similarly, there would also be no meaning without hermeneutics, that is to say, without a more or less conscious interpretation. In fact, meaning conditions being, while hermeneutics conditions meaning itself, since the question of meaning is a human hermeneutical question. With this, we pass from the ontological question of being to the hermeneutical question of meaning and, finally, to the question of the meaning of hermeneutics. Such meaning would be, precisely, a hermeneutical meaning and hence one not given in a merely substantial mode but interpreted by human beings as hermeneutico-linguistic (or symbolic, *pace* Cassirer) animals. Language is the key of meaning, insofar as it is human meaning, constituted in the process of interpretation, of interchange, and of cultural communication.

To sum up, the meaning of hermeneutics is a human, humanistic, or anthropological meaning. Hermeneutics is, to resort to a Heideggerian analogy, the *shepherd* of relational meaning. And the figure that presides over this meaning is the transitive and elusive, human or humanized, Hermes, whose projection is democratic and who conducts the mediation between a good life and a good death. It is not by accident that he is the phallic god of life and psychopomp, the god of death, symbolizing, therefore, a *complexio oppositorum* that mediates between the tragic and the comic, good and evil, meaning and meaninglessness, mania and melancholia, negativity and positivity, as well as in the sphere of physics, the particle and the wave, in keeping with the slogan *contraria sunt complementaria*, which inspired the physicist Niels Bohr. Both this slogan and this mythical figure of Hermes may serve as our guides for the purpose of relating—as we will in this text—hermeneutical philosophy, which since Heidegger and Gadamer has been concerned with the problematic of language as interpretation, and the psycho-anthropology of Carl Jung, following a rich tradition that has insisted on the importance of symbolism for individual and collective human life. But we will start by situating the emergence of philosophical hermeneutics in the context of Western philosophy.

I. PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

Classically, Western philosophical tradition has been interested in the search for truth and in science (*episteme*), to which it has attributed a universal value, and has been only mildly preoccupied with the phenomenon of interpretation. It tended to relegate interpretation to a marginal and irrelevant case of knowledge, to which it appeared in the problematic cases of doubt, indefiniteness, absence of crucial elements of judgment, transcription errors, and so forth. One would have to wait until the twentieth century to discover the philosophical and anthropological importance of interpretation, with its entire gamut of signification, including: a) expression, exposition, or explanation of a text’s meaning; b) translation from one language to another, rendering understandable what was initially unintelligible (*hermeneutes* was one who understood the language of the barbarians and was able to say the same in Greek); and c) performance (of a musical piece) or staging (in the

case of theatre), where the work of art was effectively realized, happened or took its place, thereby assuming an existence, which would otherwise be lacking.

And so, hermeneutics developed throughout the twentieth century as a philosophical movement organized around the problem of interpretation, reflection on language, and discovery of symbolism as the “foundation” of both. Interpretation and language thus became the point of departure for the hermeneutical promise for a renewal of philosophical thinking. German philosophers Martin Heidegger and his student Hans-Georg Gadamer undertook to retrieve from the philosophical “closet” the old “art of interpretation,” which lay there, semi-forgotten. Their goal was to elaborate a theory capable of accounting for what actually happens when we interpret and to transform the problem of interpretation into a *sine qua non* for the rethinking of the philosophical problematic in its entirety. In the aftermath of Husserl’s failure to establish phenomenology as the basis for all knowing, in keeping with the traditional project of metaphysics, Heidegger proposed to abandon the project of “founding,” characteristic of the entire history of Western metaphysics, and to assume this failure as something unsurpassable. We would have to accept the impossibility of reaching an absolutely solid foundation, guaranteeing the validity of our science and our consciousness. The consequence of this acceptance is not just a drowning in the dark waters of relativism, of skepticism, and of arbitrariness, as the defenders of metaphysics forewarned, but, instead, the appearance of a new consciousness we propose to call “hermeneutical consciousness.” This new consciousness keeps close to existence, accepting its contingent nature, and recognizes the necessity of interpretation not as a defect to be overcome thanks to the conquest of pure knowledge but as the constitutive characteristic of human existence and of the reality given in it.³

In hermeneutics, the problem of interpretation appears in connection with language and is presented as a universal problem, affecting our experience as a whole, our awareness of the world, and our self-knowledge and relation to the other. This problem may, therefore, provide us with a guiding thread to the universe of human discourse in its totality and as a guide for our reflections on the human and its world. It could be said that the human cultural universe is a fabric of words, models, concepts, theories, hypotheses, and so on, that is to say, of interpretations, mediating between human beings and reality—interpretations, within which both (humans and reality) acquire their specific configuration and determination. Hermeneutics studies, precisely, this interpretative *relation* between the human and the real, and it treats this relation as a starting point for the rethinking of philosophy as a whole.

Philosophical hermeneutics is presented as a “general theory of interpretation.”⁴ “Interpretation,” in turn, means not a mode of knowing, a particular type of knowledge that exists alongside other kinds of knowledge, but the “mode of being” proper to humans, who live in (with, on, of, against...) their own interpretations of the world and, indeed, themselves. We should not understand hermeneutics as a reflection on method, nor as a suggestion for specifically “adequate” or “correct” method of interpretation. What it implies is the exact opposite: to put in question, with the degree of radicality no other philosophy of the last century managed to attain, the primacy modern thinking has attributed to method or to knowledge and, by the same token, to reclaim the validity, legitimacy, and even priority of the experience of meaning that takes place outside these narrow formal-methodological limits. To this end, Gadamer formulates and elaborates, in all its varieties, the philosophical question: What exactly happens (to us) when we interpret?

The question concerning interpretation has proven to be extraordinarily fecund, in that it has become the focal point or the guiding thread that allowed us to reformulate the philosophical problematic in its totality and to find a substitute to the ancient question of being and the modern question of the subject. Interpretation is not a special procedure, to which one resorts, which it is impossible to understand or to know something directly. Nor is it a mode of knowing specific to the human sciences, as Dilthey suggested. In this sense, hermeneutics exceeds the partiality of the methodical question in the human sciences. Beyond the scope of epistemology, interpretation and its corollary understanding are, as we have already indicated, the constitutive elements of the human as human, the originary factors in our peculiar mode of being. Hence, the human being appears as a hermeneutical or linguistic animal (not one that is exclusively rational) that, instead of being adapted to a fixed

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and determined *environment*, lives in and, in light of the most recent biological discourse, is *ex-apted* and not just *ad-apted* to the *world*, which is in large part the product of its own interpretation, whether theoretical and linguistic or practical and work-related.

It is, therefore, the very human existence that has a hermeneutical character. While this existence is finite, interpretation becomes an infinite task with a circular structure, inside which there is neither a neutral observer nor pure objectivity. This does not imply, however, a fall into subjectivism: now the observer and the observed belong to a third horizon that envelops them both, and interpretation effects a “fusion of horizons,” which happens at the heart of language. Language thus presents itself as a process, through which one can put oneself forth “as someone,” thematize something “as something,” and so give oneself both as such.

In this way language acquires a gnoseological as much as an epistemological dignity. On the one hand, what is questioned here—following the humanists of the Renaissance, Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt—is the classical instrumental conception that reduces language to a mere external object in the service of the transmitting thought or of providing information about a reality, supposedly already previously given or attained independently of language itself. Instead, it would be more accurate to view language as an “organ” of consciousness and of thought that, even though it may be criticized, revised, and under certain conditions abandoned, is neither neutral nor transparent inasmuch as it assents to a “worldview” (see, for instance, the notion of *Weltansicht* in Humboldt). On the other hand, albeit relatedly, stands the affirmation that, far from being a mere representation (*Vorstellung*), a copy, or a reflection of reality from which it is independent, language is an originary and original “exposition” (*Darstellung*) of the real. Such an exposition is understood as the realization of the real, based on the model cases of theatrical “staging” and “musical execution” (wherein the work of art happens and with which, for better or for worse, it “is” identical), as well as of the game and the carnival. All of these notions refer to a dynamic reality, whose mode of being is the same realization, to a reality that only is in its interpretations. We might say that if our thinking and knowing are constituted linguistically and interpretatively, this is because being itself is already language.

It is thus that Gadamer reincorporates into the current philosophical discourse the word “hermeneutics,” renewing its sense and taking it out of its seclusion in the specialized spheres of philology and exegesis. Whereas this word is a part of the Romanticist inheritance, its origin is traceable through the humanist tradition back to the mythic figure of Hermes, the Greek god of language and of communication among opposites. Classically, hermeneutics revolved around the problem of interpretation of the expressed through language and, in particular, of what was immutable in a text, whether it was sacred or literary. Here, to interpret meant to understand the meaning of a text, to apprehend it, to assimilate it, or, metaphorically speaking, to “feed oneself” (*alimentarse*) with it, that is, “to eat it up” (*comerlo*). The text in its materiality referred to something other than its very materiality, to a *meaning* that does not lie “beyond” the text, but rather “over here”; indeed, meaning is not what is beyond but what *happens* over here, *between* the text and the interpreter, in a language, in an interpretation, which will now be seen in terms of a “fusion of horizons.” Meaning, which actually is-not, happens in interpretation, re-creating or re-generating itself between the text and the interpreter, exceeding all external fixing, be it dogmatic or methodical. It has an ontological status similar to that of a true conversation, a game, or a carnival, that only exist when they are held (*se celebran*) and in their taking-place (*celebraciones*).

Upon dismissing the possibility of an immediate and direct grasp of reality that would serve as the ultimate foundation of our knowledge, Gadamer puts in question, at the same time, the assertion that the primary function of language is communicative. Language is not exactly an instrument, a sign that serves to express or communicate information or knowledge previously secured outside of it, through reason, experience, or revelation—it does not produce more or less imperfect “copies” of the *original*. Language should be seen as an *organ* and an *organism* that mediates between the subject and the object from the standpoint of an *intermediary world* (*Zwischenwelt*: Humboldt).

II. BEING, LANGUAGE, AND MEANING

Interpretation is thus neither a mere copy, a reflection of the given, nor a pure creation of subjectivity. Rather, it is a translation or a transposition of the said, the seen, the sensed into the language of the interpreter, a “stained copy of subjectivity” (A. Schaff), a fusion of horizons, a play of combinations (*un juego a con-jugar*, literally: a play of playing-with), and, more concretely, a process which none of the parties involved dominates completely, insofar as it unfolds precisely in-between them, in its “putting in relation.” In this way, *mimesis* and *poiesis* are correlated as two aspects of the same hermeneutical process, in which being is *worded* (apalabrado), that is to say, gains the right of admission into language in its representation and concrete realization. Consequently, being cannot be defined as something static or immutable, but as something “in relation” to the other, something constitutively open to new representations or interpretations, in which alone it is.

Language rises to an ontological rank: linguisticity does not only pervade our consciousness but also traverses and substantiates being itself. As a result, being is freed from the classical absolutist interpretation and is ready to be reinterpreted as language. If being itself is language, then we are dealing with a dynamic conception of the real, and of the human being itself, not as a pure essence but, resorting to a musical analogy, as a score to be performed, or a text to be interpreted. And, consequently, truth also cannot be conceived as a methodologically grasped and discovered “state” but as a process immanent to discourse itself, in which interlocutors attempt to reach an agreement about the thing.

When it comes to Gadamer’s thinking, it is worth emphasizing certain ruptures characteristic of postmodernity, especially the lightening of the old notion of “being” by its redefinition as language. The affirmation that being is from the outset impregnated with the word, or with interpretation, precludes the idea of being as a solid and immovable foundation and thus initiates the process of dispersion or dissemination. This rejection of the classical concept of being, in the sense of substance, does not imply for Gadamer that behind interpretation, behind the “realm of representation,” lies absolute nothingness. Hermeneutics does not operate with meaning in the substantial sense, but neither does it entail a version of sense as a mere “surface effect.” Hermeneutically, meaning is something infrastructural, radical, subterranean, insofar as it emerges in a preconscious mode from lived experience. Even though everything is interpretation, we should not forget that for Gadamer explicit interpretation demands and presupposes a previous implicit comprehension (pre-judgment) immanent to language itself (or, as Dilthey thought, to *lived experience*).

This, then, is how Gadamer avoids a possible relapse into fictionalism: for him, writing is always already a reading, and interpretation is a re-interpretation of a previous source, that is, an explicit articulation of a web of implicit relations, a “cultivation” of virtual affinities, and a configuration of accepted and pre-sensed meaning (*un sentido pre-sentido y consentido*). This Gadamerian affirmation would be misinterpreted as a statement of facts or of empirical truth, in which case it would be transformed into a mere legitimation of the really given, of the state of things. Instead, his thesis would pertain to hermeneutical truth that would express a fundamental attitude for our coming face-to-face with reality and with life, a desire and a demand that make critique and a transgression of the given possible. In the name of what could this “revision” take place? Not in the name of something merely present and existent in a thingly mode, but of something absent, latent, and deferred (which is the case with meaning in Gadamer). There would be no “direct” access to meaning, the re-creation of which only endures through its interpretations. This lack of directedness does not disingenuously negate existence in this world of superficial interpretations. On the contrary, it is affirmed here that there are better and worse interpretations, but the criterion cannot be either purely subjective nor dependent upon the classical notion of truth as adequation. The hermeneutical idea of meaning therefore exceeds subjectivity and objectivity, and points toward an intersubjectivity attained within a communally shared and lived language.

This hermeneutical conception implies a subversion or a reversion of Platonism. In contrast to the Platonic hypothesis of meaning as a luminous celestial supra-world—populated by static rational essences, independent in their absolute and immutable existence, impassive in the face of the imperfect copies they sustain in the

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world of becoming—we now discover that traces of meaning lead us to an obscure *bottom without bottom* of latent, germinating models, endowed with a quasi-real or surreal existence, since they only exist in their realizations of interpretative appearances.

To say that language, which pervades all our interpretations, lacks a rational, i.e., a solid, foundation does not mean that it is something absolutely unfounded, chaotic, released to chance, or purely conventional and arbitrary. For Gadamer, quite on the contrary, language has a “foundation,” even if it is not one that is “solid” but “liquid.” This is what Gadamer terms “fundamental metaphorism.”

Philosophical reflection opens itself to language and to the discovering, as Nietzsche noted, that behind language one finds a (symbolic) image or, as Gadamer said, that language, the *medium* of our comprehension, has a metaphorical foundation. And so, neo-hermeneutics flows toward the “seashore” of symbolism. Let us recall, in this respect, that Kant, following a dominant tendency in the history of philosophy, conceived of the sphere of knowing, “the land of truth,” in contraposition to the realm of illusion, superstition, and ignorance, and that this land was symbolized for him by the famous image of an island in an ocean of meaninglessness.

Against the closure of philosophy, classically constituted through the exclusion of symbolism (just as the Church established itself by means of a negation of gnostic heresies and modern science parenthesized feeling and imagination), hermeneutics finally discovers its symbolic foundation, initiating, albeit in a very prudent and limited way, the exploration of this “unknown” “ocean”—unknown at least to classical philosophy but, from time immemorial, crisscrossed by poets, mystics, dreamers, visionaries, madmen, and adventurers.

This overview of the most significant outlines of Gadamerian hermeneutics should suffice for our present attempt to point out certain parallels and even complementarities between this philosophical current and the approaches that arise from the investigations of symbolism.⁵

III. SYMBOLISM

In the Western world, the twentieth century was a culmination of the apparently unshakeable confidence in the power of science and technology to resolve every problem and to respond to any challenge facing humanity. Even Marxism, which has proclaimed itself the representative of the revolutionary Left, considered itself scientific and, in the name of science, discredited as infantile the concrete utopias of “romantic” socialisms and anarchisms. Everything that did not suit the “official” perspective of scientific progress remained disqualified as illusory, regressive, decadent, or reactionary. In this context, symbolic thinking was evaluated in comparison to the model of scientific thought, elaborated on the basis of classical physics. As a result, it appeared to be a byproduct of the human mind; a chaotic and arbitrary fruit engendered by imagination whenever it was not steered and controlled by methodic reasoning; or an atavistic remainder or an islet within civilization, wherein, despite everything, “primitive mentality” persisted.

Seen as something irrational, gratuitous, superfluous, or, in the best of cases, merely decorative, the symbolism of myth, of art, of religion, and of language was juxtaposed to the prestige of the concept, the official mouthpiece of truth, conquered by science in its sober and objective, methodic and rigorous, investigations. The prophets of progress believed that they finally stripped from reality veils woven of ignorance, fear, and superstition and that reality, then, could be contemplated directly through the objective glance of science, freed from any mythic, metaphysical, religious, and even ethical prejudice. Symbolism would be thus condemned to extinction or to being reduced to a “reserve” of the purely decorative.

Nonetheless, the development of the sciences and of philosophies over the past one hundred years signaled a departure from the dominant positivist conception of the century before that. One of the keys for understanding this phenomena lies in a reconsideration of symbolism that took place in various cultural spheres, wherein it came to be seen as something worthy of study insofar as it was seen, at least, psycho-socially effective, that is

to say, “real” in some sense. We may briefly sum up this revalorization of symbolism at the basis of the “new scientific spirit” (G. Bachelard), considering it from the standpoint of four fields of knowledge: ethnology, psychology, physics, and philosophy.⁶

In order to begin its investigation of the symbolism of “primitive people,” ethnology had to overcome a powerful prejudice doubly activated in Christianity and in the onset of modernity. It had to do with the prejudice concerning the superiority and the universal validity of the Western conception of the world. This ethnocentrism, affecting such important authors as Levy-Bruhl and Frazer, prevented them from paying attention to the meaning inherent in the manifestations of the “primitive soul” and forced them to consider such manifestations as pseudo-phenomena, with a diminished gnoseological and ontological reach. “Primitive mentality” was deemed equivalent to the products of infantile imagination, which likewise was devalued as an obscure and foggy pre-history of adult maturity, representing rationality and authentic reality (in other words, the reality sanctioned by the dominant social consensus).

Psychology, which, in turn, began with the studies of pathology, came across grave obstacles when it attempted to reduce the phenomenology of mental illness to purely physiological causes. The failure of this reductive endeavor inspired by positivist methodology, which had such notable success within the sphere of natural sciences—and, particularly, in mechanics—forced us to recognize the autonomy of the psyche, at least to the extent that it generates pathological symptoms or symbols, as well as postulate the existence of a zone of personality distinct from consciousness and irreducible to the latter.

When symbolism emerges from this dual scientific experience, it is reinforced in its standing as a “psycho-anthropological reality,” which is acknowledged as a peculiar kind of reality: although not easily detectable through conventional empirical methods, it is that which we most immediately apprehend and that in which human beings actually live. Humans are, hence, uprooted from external reality—be it cosmic, natural, or social—and come to be seen as beings planted in a world that is culturally configured, linguistically mediated, and symbolically interpreted.

On the other hand, at the beginning of the past century physics managed to penetrate subatomic levels, where it became impossible, for instance, to decide on the nature of light as a wave or a particle. With this, physics itself inched closer to the understanding that its knowledge of the real was not as absolute as it had been considered before but that it relies on the hypotheses or models cast over the unknown. The descriptions of the subatomic world are only models of something we can neither see nor touch, and we do not know anything about this world, except on the terms of these very models.⁷ The theories of physics cease to be seen as neutral copies that reflect reality as it is in itself, i.e., in a neutral mode, “neither touching nor soiling it.” In their capacity as models, these theories are instruments with heuristic values and a certain degree of creativity. A peculiar relation to a peculiar reality they themselves configure is established, so that the discipline is able to operate on its object and to predict its behavior in a clearly probabilistic way. Physics thus recognizes that its knowledge is symbolic.

Henceforth, the vanguard of natural science breaks with the influence of its previous tendency, rooted in the human being in general and in the nineteenth-century attitude in particular, to believe that our experience of the world—whether scientific, everyday, or religious—possesses a value of authentic and absolute knowledge. As a result of this prejudice, human beings identify the psycho-mental content that experience provides them with—and, in the last instance, that it co-generates—with reality itself. Here, one conflates in a disingenuously realist way, one’s own images and ideas with the real as it is in itself, something that happens, for instance, when myth is interpreted literally, as though it were a “history” recounting real facts that took place in historical time. Be this as it may, theory of relativity shatters the positivist illusion that physics, as a simple prolongation and elaboration of the data accumulated in direct observation, can provide a total explanation of cosmos as a whole.

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In the field of philosophy, we can refer to Nietzsche as one of the intuitive precursors to the formulation of the gnoseological, ontological, ethical, and cultural problematic that emanates from the consideration of the role of symbolism in human life.⁸ In the twentieth century, having compiled the outcomes of the latest scientific investigations of the time, the neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer succeeded in putting forth, more formally, the entire problematic of symbolism in the core of the official tradition of philosophy.⁹ For Cassirer, the Kantian doctrine, which sees in the spontaneous activity of the mind an essential factor in theoretical knowledge, ethical action, and aesthetic judgment, serves as a focal point and a bridge. The scientific work of theoretical elaboration, uncoupled from the primary experience of the real by means of the concept and elevated to the status of universality, now presents itself as a process of symbolization.

Henceforth, it would be impossible to consider the scientific vision of the world as a more or less perfect copy of absolute reality, as opposed to an apparatus of capturing, assimilating, and elaboration empirical material through a logico-theoretical symbolism. For Cassirer, this is not the only modality of symbolism, for he accentuates its linguistic and mythical varieties. Myth, language, and science constitute three fundamental symbolic forms, through which human beings enter into contact with reality. Science departs from empirical material not immediately given to the senses; it is, rather, something that has been “put forth” by the mind in its spontaneous activity, as result of the more or less conscious work accomplished by means of linguistic and mythical symbols. I will not contemplate now the relations between science, language, and myth. It is enough to retain the fundamental thesis concerning what sustains Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms, namely that human beings enter into a relation with the real and modulate this relationality by projecting an intermediate world of symbols that, entwined amongst themselves, make up the intricacies of experience and effectuate this projection in various forms, autonomous and irreducible amongst themselves.

As these brief indications demonstrate, the twentieth century was destined for a re-discovery of the symbol, which in our Greco-Christian culture has been abandoned and subjected to a progressive forgetting, which proceeded in several waves, from the Aristotelian conceptualization of substance to the legalist and dogmatic Christian literalism and the nominalism of modern subjectivism. The psycho-social consequences of this re-discovery have already started to manifest themselves, even though their scope may be determined only in the future.

IV. THE MORPHOLOGY OF THE SYMBOLIC UNIVERSE¹⁰

A systematic study and categorization of what populates the so-called “jungle of symbols” allows us to discover a certain internal articulation in this apparent chaos. Symbols tend to cluster around dynamic schemata, forming “constellations” and, in their turn, these “constellations” converge into three meta-structures: the heroic (or schizomorphic), the mystical (or antiphastic) and the synthetic (or dramatic). It should be noted that the latter two belong to the same “region” of the nocturnal, in contrast to the region of the diurnal, to which the first meta-structure pertains.

In the diurnal or heroic region, the capacity for abstraction and distinction predominates alongside the principle of non-contradiction: imagination functions polemically, relying upon the accentuation or exaggeration of the difference between contrary images—between the opposites (a hyperbolic antithesis)—that make possible a dualist vision. Crucially, here, temporality separates the positive from the negative aspects. The former are projected onto something or someone extra-temporal, while the latter remain associated with the domain of becoming and of destiny, irrevocably linked to death. Time is therefore configured, in the first instance, under the symbolic order of the animal-natural, of darkness, or of abyss, not to mention that it carries the unmistakably feminine connotations. The Hero, armed with a Sword and ready to fight to death, stands up against this all-devouring Monster. The symbols of luminosity are opposed to darkness, while the terror of falling into the abyss of the nocturnal is compensated by the impulse for an ascent that guides the battle against time itself. We witness here a “flight from this world” propelled by a desire for eternity. But, despite a polemical and antithetical framing of the struggle, the mere fact of figuring what is evil (of representing the

danger, of symbolizing one's anxiety) is already a mode of domesticating or conjuring it. The danger of the fall, symbolized by the flesh (*la carne*)—whether sexual or alimentary—and threatening every impulse for an ascent, harbors at the same time an attractive and seductive dimension, thanks to which the terror of the abyss is charged, also, with the sense of fascination or “temptation”.

To this diurnal region belong those philosophies where a radically dualistic and formalist thinking predominates and where such thinking takes the shape of a spiritual rationalism, as it happens in the East in the cases of *samkia* or *Vedanta* and in the West in Parmenides, Plato, or Descartes and, in general, in all objective and scientific systems of knowledge. Of course, with the exception of a few pathological cases, this predominant tendency is not absolute, to the extent that it is counterbalanced with the more or less latent enactment of the nocturnal.

This persecution of transcendence nevertheless carries with itself a fundamental paradox, expressed in the figure of Icarus. This hero wishes to fly so high that finally his wings of wax melt in the heat of the Sun. The monopoly of the diurnal region culminates in a kind of schizophrenia. Plato himself knew that the traction for elevation depended on the obscurity of the Cave, that is to say, that it was due to the very temporal and material condition it opposed.

And so, side-by-side with the polemical attitude of the heroic structure, or, in some cases, against it, emerges another imaginative attitude, which does not search for an antidote against time in what lies beyond. Now it is nature itself that takes the shape of a warm refuge that protects us from the inclemency of time. Darkness is euphemized as a serene night; imagination does not flee from time, but endeavors to organize and configure it. We are thus approaching another grand region of the symbolic universe where the nocturnal receives a positive valorization and is subdivided, in its turn, into two further structures—the mystical and the synthetic. The former is constituted through the strategies of euphemization, escalated to the level of antiphrasis, which inverts the affective value of images so that we can expect to encounter light in the very heart of dark night. The latter find the extra-temporal in the very fluidity of time, in an attempt to reconcile the desire for eternity with the intuitions of becoming.

In mystical symbolism, value (the symbolic Treasure) does not lie in the upper region to which one would ascend, but, rather, in the depths one would have to “penetrate.” The abyss receives a euphemistic interpretation of a cavity, to which one would descend smoothly and pleasurably. The Hero—or, better: the anti-Hero—is disarmed, does not fight, and complacently allows himself to be carried by the Dragon in a sort of immersion to a narcissistic state or a regression to the maternal breast, only to be spat out later (cf. Jonah, Pulgarcito, etc.). Here, there are no unequivocal distinctions: the contours of the image become hazy, to the point that everything gets confounded with everything else in a sort of primordial chaos. Death loses its terrifying connotations it used to have in a diurnal region and becomes euphemized as a “homecoming,” as an end of a journey that signals the beginning of a new one. The valorizations of the diurnal region are thus inverted: in place of the principle of non-contradiction, we come across the coincidence of opposites.

The synthetic structures, on the other hand, are characterized by the tendency to compose images in a complex whole, where the opposites are neither excluded nor conflated. Rather, they alternate, succeed and complement one another, integrated into a single plot as phases in a cyclical process (“the eternal return”) as well as stages of development (progress). The contrast between the dualist and the monist conceptions is harmonized in a “smooth dualism” or in a concentric arrangement by means of a third element, which establishes and guarantees the inclusion of opposites in a dynamic totality that thrives on tension and constantly equilibrates itself.

V. PSYCHIC SYMBOLISM: CARL JUNG

Although the work of Jung is motivated, mainly, by a psychotherapeutic interest, so much so that everything stated in it remains oriented in this practical direction, Jungian reflections are not only anchored in his

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professional experience but also exhibit an inspiration and a series of philosophical consequences that are not always explicit.¹¹ In this sense, there is a certain convergence between his thought and Gadamer's hermeneutics, where the key parallel is between the Gadamerian conception of being as *language* and the Jungian consideration of reality as a *symbol*.

Jung obviously shies away from the posing of ontological questions, since they are irrelevant to his therapeutic intention. A methodological stratagem that recurs throughout his work is that, as a psychologist, he is not preoccupied with reality "in itself," but in relation to the individual who pursues not a pure but a psychic truth. It is sufficient to cite, in this respect, as an extreme example his attitude to God. When a psychologist speaks of God, he does not aspire to doing theology and does not investigate the nature of God, but is referring to a symbol and to the influence it has on the psyche.

On the margins of what is, for all intents and purposes, a methodological resource, a similar proposal is to be found in the typically hermeneutical attitude, which Gadamer elaborates starting from the field of ontological research. In hermeneutical terminology, we may say that language always interjects itself between reality and human being, such that being itself is language; in Jungian terms, we may observe that between the Real and the subject, there is a "third world," a complex web of symbols, a *psychic reality* which is neither objective nor merely subjective and through which we actually enter into contact with the world.

One must keep this in mind so as to understand Jung when he affirms that this "reality" may refer to the fright before a phantasm, such as the fear of fire. Regardless of its origin, what affects us is a psychic image, a symbolic transcription of objective or subjective processes.¹² Reality, our reality, the reality in which we live—concludes the psychologist—is always charged with a human significance and with imaginary undertones, drawn from the symbolic world.

Now, it would be wrong straightforwardly to identify the symbol with the sign, as, unlike the latter, the former is not simply conventional or arbitrary. Nor is it a mere copy or a reflection of objectivity, in that it already includes a distortion we could qualify as subjective, only if this distortion would respond, in the last instance, to a transcendental subjectivity. It is not surprising that, in this context, we operate with a term derived from the philosophy of Kant, given that Jung frequently resorts to Kantian terminologies and schemata, to which he attributes an anthropological sense. Thus, following a Jungian interpretation, Kantian transcendental subjectivity is anchored in the depths of human psychism, where the individual is entwined with the collective. As opposed to a "naked" and "pure" reality, the symbol will come to denote a humanly contaminated reality, one that is configured in keeping with human imperatives. These imperatives will not be, on their part, merely subjective or individual; instead, in the final instance, they will appear as transindividual insofar as they are rooted in the collective unconscious. The interpretation or the configuration of reality is a re-creation that takes place through *a priori* factors inscribed in our common human nature.

For Jung, the symbol is an assemblage of objective and subjective elements. The image becomes congruent with the unconscious content projected upon it and thus gets charged with psychic energy and invested with meaning, albeit not explicitly thematized. While, as we have already noted, for Gadamer meaning happens in the circular interweaving of the text with the prejudices of the hermeneutic thinker through language, for Jung, this happening takes place in the symbol (*Sinnbild*: the image of meaning), so that meaning emerges by means of a mediation of the image and the place where consciousness and the unconscious intersect, in acts of living. At bottom, there seems to be the same intuition at the background of these two ways of thinking: that, for good or ill, the reality of a human being is, in the last instance, a text and that, moreover, through interpretation the meaning that latently animates this text would come to light.

The question of meaning, which in Gadamer's work was posed at the philosophical level, appears in Jung's *corpus* in its concrete application to human life, that is to say, as a question of great importance for the very survival of human being (such that psychic disorders would signal a loss of meaning or *asymbolia*). Relatedly,

the reversal of Platonism, which we extracted from the Gadamerian thesis also reappears here: the bottom without bottom where meaning hid before interpretation is now transformed into an obscure unconscious region, populated by archetypes that are but condensations of psychic energy. In this way, Plato's transcendent Ideas descend to the lowest depths of humanity, where the spiritual and the instinctive merge, while their rational-static existence is replaced with the material energetic-relational insistence. Jungian archetypes do not enjoy a separate existence akin to that of Plato's Ideas; nevertheless, they stubbornly weigh upon humanity, not from the outside but from within, that is to say, immanently.

It follows that Jungian psychology can serve as the point where the abstract hermeneutical philosophy of Gadamer would "come down to earth" and would get invested with a concrete anthropology. The Jungian image of the human being is, actually, wholly hermeneutical: the human as a living being who interprets herself interpreting the world. The process of humanization, to which every one of us is indebted, presents itself as a hermeneutical process: *individuation as hermeneusis*. For Jung, the human is not a static reality but an ongoing becoming-oneself. The central place modernity has allotted to the I and to consciousness is emptied out in the name of the forever-deferred self (*Selbst*). A correlation similar to the one Gadamer discovered in the mediation between the text and its meaning will come to mediate between the I and the self.

CONCLUSION

This displacement of the psychic center of gravity from the I as an immobile central point to the self as a decentered center may be put in dialogue with Gadamer's proposal to transfer preponderance from technico-instrumental, methodical reason of modernity to language. Gadamer presents abstract reason and its methodical attitude as secondary phenomena that are erected on the grounds constituted by previous interpretations and valorizations, condensed in the so-called *natural* or *maternal language*.

In this sense, Jung and Gadamer coincide in their diagnosis of a unilateral exaltation, by Western culture, of a model of excessively restrictive rationality, mostly foreclosed to, for example, the human sciences. As a counterpoint to the undeniable material progress in the short term, this exaltation leads to a repression, disqualification, forgetting, or exclusion of other factors or modalities of rationality, charged with the task of responding to the most elementary cultural and symbolic necessities of human beings, such as those of meaning.

The success modernity achieved in its Promethean effort of rationalization, following the routes opened by mechanical physics, have come, according to both authors, at a high price. Its obverse is the sacrifice of other forms of life and of experience, relegated to the background, when they were not altogether forgotten or confounded with the irrational. It would be necessary, therefore, to retrieve the repressed, to establish a dialogue between the rational and the irrational, between consciousness and the unconscious, between spirit and life, between *animus* and *anima*, and between *logos* and *mythos*. That this encounter entails high risks is something quite obvious, but it is equally obvious that to prevent it from happening is even more risky. It is not suggested that we uncritically immerse ourselves in the "stormy ocean" of irrationalism but that we tease out an ampler, more open and integrated rationality and personality from the encounter, one that would be capable of interpretatively articulating—translating, configuring—the irrational in a non-repressive fashion. Such would be a new rationality that would be represented by language (the symbolic) as an intermediary instance that, traversing opposites, would non-dialectically interrelate them, conserving their differences.

We may finally observe a convergence between Gadamer and Jung in the notion of language-symbol. In contrast to the strict formality of the concept, language-symbol presents certain informality or spontaneity that permits it to access what conceptuality excludes and, consequently, leaves opaque, namely life-world with its necessities and desires, fears and hopes, paradoxes and absurdities. Language-symbol originates in this vital or experiential context, where, according to Dilthey and the late Husserl, the events are not at all dissociated from their significations. Through it, one can attend to life, give it the word, represent it and interpret it. In contrast

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to abstract reason that understands nothing of values, loves, or affections, hermeneutical (linguistico-symbolic) reason knows that it is born of them. It neither forgets nor denegates its past, from which it still distances itself, so as to reinterpret the past from the present in an opening of the forever-uncertain future.

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NOTES

1. In this respect, three very different hermeneutical accounts of the search for meaning are V. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Beacon Press, 2006; J. Grondin, *Du sens de la vie*. Paris: Ballarmin, 2003; A. Ortiz-Osés, *Amor y sentido*. Barcelona: Anthropos, 2003.
2. Cazenave, M., *La science et l'âme du monde*. Paris : Albin Michel, 1996, 51
3. The most important work for all of contemporary hermeneutics is Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. New York: Crossroad, 2004, as well as the studies of P. Ricoeur, including *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974; G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, Polity Press, 1991; and of J. Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994. For the context of hermeneutics and its reception in the Spanish-American context, consult *Diccionario de Hermenéutica* edited by A. Ortiz-Oses and P. Lanceros, Bilbao, Universidad Deusto, 1997 (4th Ed. Ampliada y revisada 2004) as well as L. Garagalza, *Introducción a la hermenéutica contemporánea*. Barcelona, Anthropos, 2002 and M. Beuchot & F. Arenas-Dolz, *Hermenéutica en la encrucijada. Analogía, retórica y filosofía*. Anthropos, Barcelona, 2008.
4. M. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
5. The combination of hermeneutical philosophy and symbolism presented here has been developed especially in the Spanish context and applied to the interpretation of philosophy and culture by A. Ortiz-Osés. The most noteworthy work in this regard is *Amor y sentido. Una hermenéutica simbólica*. Anthropos, Barcelona, 2003. In English translation, one may consult his *The Sense of the World*. Davis, Colorado, 2007.
6. Bachelard, G., *Le nouvel esprit scientifique*. Paris, PUF, 1991.
7. Cf. B. D'Espagnat, *À la recherche du réel—Le regard d'un physicien*. Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1979.
8. Cf. F. Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extramoral Sense," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufman. New York: Penguin Books, 1976, 42-6.
9. Cf. E. Cassirer, *The philosophy of symbolic forms*. Yale University Press, 1958.
10. This presentation of what I have called "The Morphology of the Symbolic Universe" is based on a model elaborated by the anthropologist and symbologist Gilbert Durand. See his *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*. Paris, P.U.F., 1963.
11. G. Durand has proposed a bridging of the Jungian universe and philosophy, even though unrelated to the thinking of Gadamer (consult in this respect, L. Garagalza. *La interpretación de los símbolos*. Barcelona :Anthropos, 1991). For a hermeneutical consideration of Jung's work, see A. Ortiz-Osés, *C.G. Jung. Arquetipos y sentido*. University of Deusto, Bilbao, 1988.
12. In this, we would be following the line of thinking opened by Epictetus, who concluded that "what disturbs and alarms man are not the things but his opinion about the things."