

THE CONDITIONS OF ARTISTIC CREATIVITY CONSIDERED IN RELATION TO *TABOO*

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In Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature*, an interesting interpretation of the origin of metaphorical thinking is offered. As an indirect, circumlocutory mode of expression, metaphor undoubtedly falls among the specifics of literary and artistic language, though it is present even in the pragmatics of everyday communication. Following the psychologist Heinz Werner (1890-1964), Wellek and Warren write that “metaphor comes into play only among such primitive peoples as those who have taboos, objects whose ‘real’ names must not be mentioned.” The repertoire of such “solutions” for naming that which otherwise must not be named is so deeply rooted in the history of language that it has long established its own tradition of clichés. Retrospectively, these can be seen and selected as from a *cornucopia*: it is easy to list, for example, the varieties of expressions that in all human languages name death with a particular idiomatic form or are available to someone who wishes to invoke God without “taking His name in vain.” Euphemisms, if their origin truly lies in circumventing taboos, represent the oldest stylistic devices of the “metaphorical method,” (Wellek & Warren) later refined in classical rhetoric and poetic experiments.

To generalize about metaphorical *parole* as one of the privileges of literary and artistic forms is to realize that allegories, symbols, poetic images, are actually historical sophistications of that fundamental instinct for metaphorizing the world, which developed from a particular relationship to taboos. However, since a taboo is not universal and eternal but culturally conditioned and historically relative, one era will consider something a taboo which another will not. This change will require the “method” of metaphorical encryption to engage in new work on conquering some old semantic field. From the moment of the installation of the modern bureaucratic apparatus, the administrative discourse of the so-called “office vocabulary” is considered a specific form of violence against language, and consequently violence against reality itself. Comedies are often funny—on a deeper psycho-cathartic level, they are liberating—simply because of their courage to utter “the word,” to say the name of certain phenomena, even at the cost of descending into vulgarity. This could potentially be the socio-political function of the “stand-up” comedian’s charisma in a time insisting on politically correct discourse. In that sense, the function might be considered similar to the position of the jester at a monarch’s court, the person who alone is allowed to say what everyone else strategically keeps silent about. The jester's honesty derives legitimacy, if from nothing else, from the fact that kings in their position are often bored—as is today’s comedian’s legitimacy, after all, contained in the fact that he simply entertains (whatever the sort of entertainment).

“Political correctness” is a phraseological invention of modernity, but its logic, given the above, is at least ancient. Historians who have dealt with the concept recognize its first formulation and pragma in the discourse of Bolshevik revolutionaries who, after 1917, began

defining the October events and finding the “right word” for what the defeated side would undoubtedly have named “the red terror.” The practice, of course, is even older, and a similar struggle for the “meaning of events,” using language as a weapon, was waged by the opposing forces of the French bourgeois revolution one century earlier. In the institutionalized Soviet universe, the concept of “politically correct” continued to live as a “politically correct” name for what is usually known as censorship, a political-ideological hygiene of the space of public discourse. The experience of Soviet communism and Stalinist absolutism in particular suggests at least two things: firstly, that the sanctities of the communist regime were so abstract that practically anyone could offend against them, both a clearly articulated apostate, a dissident such as Trotsky, and a Meyerhold, whose theater at one point suddenly became “ideologically unreliable”. The same paradox applies when it comes to “pure music” composed by Shostakovich, whose pieces were suspected of inspiring counter-revolutionary sentiments. The abstraction of the taboo itself, its essential indefiniteness, thus condemned an entire society to decades of entrapment in an episode of severe (para-theological) paranoia. Secondly, and even more importantly, the concept in its original historical form, as well as in its etymology, suggests that being “politically correct” means being “politically right” – being on the “right” ideological path, never deviating from it. The Soviet political-ideological hygiene of public discourse could be considered a project of establishing a strange *political infallibility*, an ideal as abstract as the “aura of sanctity” surrounding a taboo. This ideal could have only been reached by “cleansing” what is politically, thus, “incorrect,” other than right, wrong, fallible. Literary-artistic behavior under the auspices of the Stalinist panopticon followed two typical patterns, one of which the history of Stalinist art recognized as a “loss of possession over one’s text,” while the other maneuvered with modes of allegorical representations and, striving to speak in “indirect ways,” forced language to dance around the taboo. Both “behaviors” are in a certain way as old as the oldest artistic dilemmas, from the periods when the artist had a much more modest self-perception than the one formulated in the spirit of modern romanticism and bequeathed to all countercultures, from the nineteenth-century *l’art pour l’art* to the age of avant-gardes, when the artist began to define himself primarily as *l’homme révolté*.

The appropriation of the concept of “political correctness” in the liberal democracies of the West may be the work of the left-oriented neo-avant-garde, its political activism motivated by what Fukuyama called “the struggle for recognition.” Applied to the dynamics of public discourse in liberal societies, this originally Soviet ideal could not even theoretically encounter such a “pure situation” to become a completely effective political-ideological technology. Acclimatizing in the liberal environment, this concept became a competitor in that J. S. Mill’s “marketplace of ideas,” participating in the irresolvable old contradiction that classical English, precisely Millian liberalism, unsuccessfully grappled with—that freedom’s limits are where another’s right to non-infringement begins. But since this definition of things is too abstract to become a recipe for solving every possible individual case, liberal societies had to make the idea of “political correctness” a subject of exhaustive debate, an issue for constant negotiation about what something is and what it is not. This discussion continues and will likely last as long as the preference for the necessary democratic chaos of a liberal society prevails over the uniform grayness of a totalitarian order. One side effect of such endless debating without a conclusion or agreement is the resentment that has seemingly made the European and American “left” as

illiberal as the conservative right once proudly was. This sociological phenomenon or trend in the political landscape of Western democracies is not particularly interesting. What is worth noting, however, concerns the philosophical positions that the insistence on politically correct speech leans on, and they are the legacy of a countercultural rebellion in Western thought represented by the thinkers often called the “post-structuralists.” These thinkers discovered that violence is an act that begins already in the plane of linguistic practice, that it is discursive, and that, accordingly, every “struggle for recognition” is therefore also a struggle for the words with which we name things. The second important implication of the post-structuralist turn has unfortunately been overlooked and forgotten, although Foucault managed to articulate it, not shying away from his own style of metaphorical ornamentation, when he announced “the end of man” on the last page of *The Order of Things*, an event after which the very “being of language” will finally shine on the “horizon.” This implication was evidently taken seriously by Derrida when he recognized that same “being of language” as the last representative of the dynasty in the logocentric history of Western “metaphysics of presence”—its “time” will come (has already begun?) once “Man” withdraws from the throne of concepts (metaphors), as “God” had yielded him this honorary place having died in a dream dreamt by Jean Paul Ritter at the dawn of the 19th century. The forgotten aspect of this implication lies in the fact that in epochs that have recognized language itself as the only true God (while all previous ones were false demiurges), every word can establish its own taboo—doesn't the obscurantism of Lacan's psychoanalytic conception of the “Big Other” express precisely this, let's call it, *pantheization of language*, in which the “subject” is merely a vassal of an incomprehensible Deus Absconditus, whose “names” (words) he is forced to use and pronounce because he cannot truly speak on his own terms at all.

If the discourse of political correctness, or the demand for politically correct discourse, is the modern version of something like the two-century mandate of the Lord Chamberlain's office in England, something like the all-seeing enlightened eye of the *Le Roi Soleil* that watches over Molière's stage and occasionally enjoys seeing himself in the role of the most just *raisonneur* deus-ex-machina, or yet a new kind of political-ideological hygiene in a necessary stage of that “struggle for recognition,” then the relationship of art, literature, and theatre to this demand must be viewed in terms of general relations of artistic and literary expression towards the taboo. The argument that in opposition to the ideal of “political correctness” stands the ideal of absolute artistic freedom of expression may be an attractive one, but it is fundamentally superficial, because presuming ideal conditions for artistic creativity means indulging in an abstract and hopeless expectation, as unrealistic as is the project of constructing a *political infallibilis*, that is – a politically infallible language, whether human or artistic.

Perhaps no other author than Carl Schmitt has brought us closer to the realization of how much art theater as a public sphere par excellence depends on the existence and functioning of taboos. In his essay *Hamlet or Hecuba*, he suggests that artistic work is not only conditioned by a kind of restriction of speech, but that it literally needs it to sort of live off it. This would be the crystallized social and political position of Shakespeare's stage, in Schmitt's interpretation of *Hamlet*, where it was absolutely necessary to thematize the taboo (because it concerns the audience and the whole of society), but not to violate it by pronouncing its “real name”: *the*

taboo of the queen's guilt, the unresolved circumstances under which Lord Darnley, the husband of Mary Stuart, was killed, the rumors circulating about it and the “truths” that must not be publicly commented on—all this participates in that famous “hamletization of the avenger” (Schmitt) by which Shakespeare dramaturgically managed to avoid the delicate question of Gertrude’s involvement in the deadly conspiracy against her husband, the late legitimate king Hamlet. The staging of the play under Queen Elizabeth’s reign on the one hand and the hope that after her death, the still politically undesirable James would be crowned on the other, creates a context that relevant theatrical work must take into account if it wants to speak about something truly *real*, something that is thought about, discussed, and debated, but publicly never spoken of. That “irruption of time,” the historical *hic et nunc*, the “core of historical reality” conditions the author’s work, setting limits on what can be written, spoken, represented, but at the same time participates and truly collaborates with the playwright in the making of the most famous piece ever written in the history of European literature. The taboo, which the playwright consciously respects and therefore chooses to dance around its core, is thus constitutive for the achieved form of articulating the theme itself. This would be, in short, the point Schmitt was attempting to make, and his exact words are the following: “Shakespeare's incomparable greatness lies in his having seized from the chaotic wealth of the political actualities of the day the figure that was susceptible of elevation to the level of myth and he did it pushed by fear and scruples and guided by tact and awe. It was through that fear and deference that he managed to grasp the core of the truly tragic and raise it to the mythical. They made him respect the taboo and transform the figure of the avenger into Hamlet.”

It is indeed questionable whether a hypothetical situation of absolute freedom would be at all stimulating for artistic thought or expression: the very word creativity seems to imply a certain maneuvering within defined frameworks, boundaries, obstacles—which can be of any sort, either internal or external: the author’s own limitations, lack of knowledge, lack of imagination, will or inspiration; on the other hand, fear of criticism, censorship, the reader’s/viewer’s *Erwartungshorizont* (Hans Robert Jauss), the plain and all too human opportunism or the trivial dictate of market fashion... All these are in fact the conditions in which art has grown as a specific kind of speech about the world, testimony to the complexity of life, articulation of the infinitesimal human perspective on things. The argument in favor of this impression is of course not presented as a plea for imposing any barriers to artistic freedom, but as a call to confront the possibility that this freedom has always been relative and always will be, interdependent with all the other social, political, and cultural factors at play. What can however certainly go unrecognized in the given historical “here and now” is the *reality of the taboo*, the character of the “elephant in the room.” An artist, a writer can thus fail to realize that an artistically adequate relationship to it is neither in submission nor in breaking, definitely not in ignoring a taboo, but in finding the right steps to dance around its core. A taboo is in that sense an essential “patron of the arts” for it enables artistic renderings to be unique and relevant, sometimes even indispensable. An artist, a playwright, an author is not free in the absence of a taboo but in the necessity to confront it and in the choice of how to approach its reality.