Word and *mimesis*: the poetic dimension of word and human expression

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The essay is developed through a dialogue between two definitions of a human being: *Human beings are human beings because they have word* (Sheler, Ebner, Ducci) and *Human beings are mimetic animals par excellence* (Aristotle). From this dialogue emerges the sense of a re-evaluation of the poetic dimension of word for human expression. A fundamental contribution to this re-evaluation of the poetic dimension of word will be provided by the research work developed by the theatre master Orazio Costa Giovangigli who spent his life solving the problem of how to bring the word of an author to life on stage through the interpretation of an actor.

Keywords: word, Edda Ducci, *mimesis*, Orazio Costa, Metodo mimico

La parola e la mimesis*: la dimensione poetica della parola e l'espressione umana*
Il contributo è sviluppato mediante un dialogo tra due definizioni dell'essere umano: "gli esseri umani sono tali perché possiedono la parola" (Sheler, Ebner, Ducci) e "gli esseri umani sono animali mimetici per eccellenza" (Aristotele). Da questa impostazione dialogica emerge il senso di ri-valutazione della dimensione poetica della parola per l'espressione umana. Un fondamentale contributo a questa ri-valutazione della dimensione poetica della parola proviene dal lavoro di ricerca svolto dal maestro di teatro Orazio Costa Giovangigli, che è stato a lungo impegnato nella esplorazione dei modi in cui trasportare la parola viva di un autore sul palcoscenico attraverso l'interpretazione attoriale.

Parole-chiave: parola, Edda Ducci, *mimesis*, Orazio Costa, Metodo mimico

Foreword

From the reflection on 'word' developed by Max Sheler, Martin Buber and Ferdinand Ebner, Italian scholar Edda Ducci (1929-2007) received inspiration for a proposal of philosophy of education based on the mystery of the reality of 'word' (Ducci, 2005).

Ducci uses the term 'mystery' in opposition to the term 'enigma'. While the latter can be solved (even if this resolution may require a lot of time and effort), the mystery will always have an edge (and precisely the most precious edge) that will escape any definition, this suggests the need to proceed in this investigation with an awareness that it will never be possible to consider this process of knowledge concluded and that this process will require an adequate approach and instrumentation (Ducci, 1999, pp. 30-31). The reality of 'word' presents itself, therefore, in this perspective, as one of the mysterious realities par excellence.

By proposing the ontological-existential statute of a human being as a statute of relationship (Ducci, 2002, pp. 87-116), word is rediscovered by Ducci as a measure of the ontological density of a human being and as the summit of the ontological participation (*methexis*) that is code of all creation (Ducci, 2002, pp. 110-111).

If the laws of relation are common to all entities, the measure of a human being is revealed by the relational complexity that constitutes 'word'[1].

And, although human beings are the only beings endowed with word, this possession does not set them in opposition to other beings but, on the contrary, expresses and manifests the common ontological participation that is shared by every being (Ducci, 2002, pp. 91-95).

Ducci develops her research around the mystery of word, proceeding with the investigation of the reality of dialogue (Ducci, 1999) founding and deepening the dynamics of *paideia* through the ontological dimension of *methexis* (Ducci, 1967).

We intend to proceed in this research, undertaken by Ducci in her investigation of the mystery of word in education, integrating the vision that *methexis* offers, (when it is accepted as a foundational movement of the onto-

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[1] Word in human beings, in fact, poses and presupposes relationship. Word is made to say something to someone: someone who can receive the spoken word because he too is a holder of word. The word therefore has both an active and a passive value: the human being is both a maker and a hearer of the word.

logical-existential statute of relationship) with that which *mimesis* can offer if given comparable status to the former. Thus, *mimesis* and *methexis* are not considered as alternatives, but, on the contrary, are recognized in their capacity to integrate with each other and to confirm the hermeneutic validity of the other perspective; here it is only a matter of gaining another point of view – that which *mimesis* provides us with – to look at the same reality – that of word in human beings – in order to discern it better, respecting its mysterious nature, and to draw from this discernment what can be useful to the process of humanisation.

Clarifying the meaning of word

Word as intended here is not, of course, to be understood as the singular of 'words' but rather as our capacity to express something that makes sense to us and to others, and to grasp meaning in the things that others express; to grasp beauty and harmony in what we observe and to create things that can be recognized by others who observe them as beautiful and harmonious; to grasp the universal in the particular and to name it; to recognize similarities and to create them. Word is what allows us to choose the right words to say something to someone but also to choose a gesture or an object to do so; it is what allows us to create artistic works that can speak to others and allow us to enjoy the work that others create. Word is what allows us to recognize the other person as a subject and to build an inter-subjective relationship with them. Thanks to the word that is in me, I can dialogue with the other, giving meaning even to silence.

Putting 'word' at the heart of what is human also means recognizing that expressing oneself is both a need and a task for every human being. It is a need that must continually find fulfilment and a task that must be carried out ceaselessly if we want to avoid the pain of dissatisfaction and existential failure.

It also means recognizing the uniqueness of each person: each person, in fact, has the word with a trait of originality and can say something that no one else can say in their place. It means affirming that the very meaning of human life must in some way be linked to the singular expression of each person. An expression, the one to which every human being is called, which reaches its fullness where it is understood by others (and if this understan-

ding only comes after one's death, the lack of it during life will certainly have entailed a great deal of pain for those who were not able to make themselves understood in their time, but nothing will have detracted from their contribution to humanity), so that the task of the individual comes to be configured as that of expressing their own word in a language that can be understood by other human beings.

On the concept of mimesis

A fundamental connection between word in human beings, as outlined here, and the dynamism of *mimesis* can be found starting from a well-known passage in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1448b): this passage can be useful to find the sense of the statement in which, just above, we mentioned the possibility and usefulness of an adequate integration between *mimesis* and *methexis*.

The ontological participation that makes us brothers and sisters with all other entities can, in my opinion, be easily understood if we recognize the mimetic nature of word and if we go back to critically reading in its implication the definition of human beings contained in the Poetics: *human beings are the mimetic animals par excellence* (*mimetikótatón*); and it is thanks to this excellence – Aristotle argues – that human beings express themselves poetically, and learn-comprehend (*manthánein*) fundamental knowledge (*mathéseis prótas*).

Every poetic expression can be recognized as a manifestation of word – as defined earlier – and specifically can be recognised as a manifestation of the mimetic nature of word.

It may seem obvious to consider the value of the mimetic/poetic dimension of word but taking care of this value in the pedagogical field is another matter. Rather, the educational path that has prevailed in the western world has been committed to privileging the purely rational aspects of word, reserving a marginal place (and always at risk of further marginalization) for those that are poetic. The poetic aspects of word are exalted only in the artist's training, and in fact confined therein. Almost as if a poetic approach to the *logos* is not necessary for the education of an adult in the western world. It is difficult not to realize how much an action (that is supposed to be educational) that is coherent with such an assumption can be the cause of deprivation in a human being, and a deprivation that concerns fundamental aspects of their

humanity with inevitable repercussions to the quality of life of individuals and of the whole community. An action that does not recognize the mimetic/poetic nature of word and considers only its logical/rational aspects has no chance to truly help an individual in the expression of his uniqueness – to realize, that is, what we have previously recognized as the need and existential task of each human being – and cannot, therefore, be called educational.

I believe there is an urgency to work to repair this partial vision and to re-evaluate the poetic dimension of the word, if only because we care about human beings and the meaning of their being on this earth.

In fact, it seems essential to do so today, at a time when a sense of disorientation and displacement of individuals seems to prevail within coexistence; at a time when the word conveyed by science seems to have lost authority and credibility, showing subalternity to economic and political laws, giving up its problematic and dialogical essence. A situation that marks the present day, which requires the reconstruction of the social fabric in its fundamental relationships, undermined by the need for isolation and by not always justified narratives that describe the other as a threat to one's own integrity. In a time in which we choose to simplify more and more complexity in the utopia of returning as soon as possible to a normality of a previous life (a previous life that presented, in truth, already strong imbalances and negative inequalities). Re-evaluating the poetic soul of word could, perhaps, remedy some drifts and reconstruct a horizon of meaning in which to recognize ourselves as human and in which also the logical/rational soul of the word could come back to life.

Given this urgency, briefly described, this poetic re-cognition of the word must be achieved not only through a purely theoretical procedure but, rather, through a hermeneutic process in which theoretical reflection has to find its measurement through praxis: to receive from it those questions necessary to intensify that sounding that is its own and those confirmations essential to understand the meaning and scope of its epistemic effort.

Moreover, only by operating within this circular modality, that which dialogically involves the theory that investigates the poetic dimension of word and the existential dynamics in which it lives, can one really effectively investigate this mysterious reality; a reality that remains in its essence precluded to a theoretical analysis that is merely logic-rational and lacks interest in a quality of *aliveness*; furthermore, the strict adherence of theory to praxis nullifies the risk of drifting in mystical speculation, a pitfall when giving attention to the word in its mysterious nature.

Mimesis *and word*

Can a philosophical-educational proposal based on these premises find in the processes of *mimesis* and of artistic creation a place of excellence to seek out the dynamics of the expression of word?

Let us investigate this by returning to reflect on the meaning that can be attributed to *mimesis* – that does not seem to be truly resolved by the solution that is often chosen as its translation: imitation (Koller 1954; Gebauer et Wulf 1992; Halliwell 2002). Aristotle, who, in the *Poetics* 1448b, defines human beings through the concept of *mimesis*, does not concern himself with defining there what this reality really is. In the *Politics*, *mimesis* is more generically expressed with the traditional Greek words for likeness(es) (Halliwell, 2002, pp. 155-156)[2]. To find a clear definition of *mimesis*, one must go back to Plato's Republic (393c) in which it is made explicit – through the verb *mimeîsthai* – as a "making oneself similar". There is *mimesis* when a human being makes himself similar to someone else or to something else. And this similarity can be achieved both through gestures and/or voice and through a process that can take place exclusively in the interiority, even without awareness. Plato calls all artists *mimetaí* (373b), and for the Philosopher, those that recite epic poetry or drama occupy a privileged place.

Having attributed to *mimesis* the meaning found in Plato's *Republic*, the proposal presented in this study is that of accepting two definitions of a human being and exploring the implications of an educational philosophical reflection (which pays attention to the dialogue between theory and praxis) searching for connections between these definitions, which seem at first glance to have little in common.

Human beings are human because they have word (an expression that Ducci takes from Sheler and Ebner);

Human beings are the mimetic animals par excellence (Aristotle's defini-

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[2] Halliwell points out that: "At *Politics* 8.5, 1340a, he claims that melodies and rhythms contain 'likenesses' (*homoiomata*, 18) of qualities of character (*ethe*), and soon afterward that they are mimetic (that they contain *mimemata*, 39) of these qualities. The two terms are here clearly synonymous, and this is confirmed by the use of 'likenesses' (*ta homoia*, 23), in the same passage, as a compendious description of mimetic artifacts. The primary concern with music in this passage also reinforces the fact that for Aristotle, as for other Greeks, the language of 'likeness(es)' could be applied to much more than the visual media of painting and sculpture".

tion in the *Poetics*).

What connects the ability to make oneself similar with *having word*? And if word is the ability to grasp and express meaning, what does *making oneself similar to the other that one wants to grasp and express meaningfully* have to do with *having word*?

A lot, perhaps everything.

To demonstrate this connection is a master of theatre, Orazio Costa Giovangigli (1911-1999), who found himself in the course of his professional existence facing and trying to solve a problem that can be expressed in these essential terms: how to make alive on the stage the word of a character (or, perhaps more correctly, the word of the author who created the character) through the word of an actor?

Orazio Costa Giovangigli, in an attempt to answer this question, came to structure a Method for an actor's training, with which he never stopped experimenting and perfecting throughout his life, based first on the rediscovery and then on the conscious use of mimetic capacity.

The Metodo mimico *for the training of actors*

Costa's research aims at training an actor to effectively express, for an audience, the word of a character (which in turn is caused by the word of an author). The concreteness and practical urgency that animates his research makes him an exceptional witness for our research: tracking his movements helps us penetrate into the mystery we are exploring without indulging in a thinking that is satisfied simply to be thought.

Costa recognised that the training of an actor is first and foremost a training to be human. Having grown up in Copeau's school, he shared with his master the certainty that first a man is formed and then a possible actor (Boggio, 2004, pp. 65-71; Piazza, 2018, pp. 28-37).

Actors must have deepened what makes them human to the point of being able to effectively measure themselves with the mystery of life that is in the word. For Costa, what makes human beings human lies in their mimetic capacity: in the poetics of their natural expressiveness (Piazza, 2018, pp. 38-45).

He observes that poetic dimension of expressivity (as already stated by Aristotle in *Poetics* 1448b) in the play that children engage with spontaneously before any educational input from adults. Therefore, it is by virtue

of an attitude, a natural expressive process, that children play (without anyone teaching them this game) to be a teacher, but also to be an airplane or a galloping horse; and this game consists precisely in making oneself similar, with a movement that is in analogical relation and that has the immediacy of connaturality, to whatever reality one desires to explore, and with this action children achieve a com-prehension of that reality (Boggio, 2004, pp. 149-163).

Through the practice of his Method, Costa aims to train the adult to rediscover his own innate ability, using the body, to make a *mimesis* of everything that has been experienced.

Costa thus forces the subject to existentially experience the brotherhood and sisterhood that binds the human being to every entity. *Mimesis* thus demonstrates *methexis*. If we can make ourselves similar with the bodily movement to any entity and this happens with the freshness of naturalness and immediacy this is a sign and proof of a *participation* that unites us. This awareness allows human beings to intimately grasp fundamental aspects of their own humanity which are necessary for the journey towards the intentional use of their own word (Boggio, 2004, pp. 69-71).

The methodology developed by Costa foresees a gradual process to reach his goals. Once the mimetic capacity of the body has been regained, it is then a matter of giving voice to this body which, in the different plastic mimic states realized by the movements representing the various realities, will be called to produce sonorities – those that constitute the single words that the body is currently expressing – which are the immediate phonetic expression of the body *mimesis*.

For Costa, in extreme synthesis, it is a matter of making the actor and the actress be what they say and say what they are; each one realizing his or her own interpretation, which will naturally have, without any forcing, its own character of originality: if one has to say 'wind', one must first become wind; if one is wind, one is authorized to say 'wind'; and each one who engages in this exercise, since they have their own body and their own feeling, will have a movement different from that of anyone else and, therefore, no one will say 'wind' in the exact same way as another. The result of making everyone reach an interpretation, which is both coherent and original, is obtained, therefore, through making oneself similar with one's own body (animated by that mimetic dynamism that has its seat in the most intimate fibres of our being) to what one wants to name and, in this mimetic-plastic condition, naming

(with a vocality that is properly the sound of the body) that word, that phrase, that line, which *is* already sense and meaning in the movement that one is making with one's own body (Colli, 1996, *passim*).

Angel of the word

The mimetic act for Costa is an act of openness and benevolence, an act of love, towards the world of natural and spiritual phenomena. An act with which we truly encounter things of the world and set out to express them is a poetic act.

> Poetry is [...] feeling similar to things for that gift that we make to the things themselves through a life that is ours and that with their signs tries to explain itself. [...] '*Mimér l'aubépine*' says Proust; 'Dancing the orange' says Rilke. It is the discovery of our natural tendency to anthropomorphize the external world, in order to feel it affectively. The child says: 'the face of the tram'... Don Quixote saw giants in windmills... [...]. Living in love, in creation, in revelation, in continuous poetry, at the cost of every desperate effort, immersed in a supernatural made up of calls in which everything means multiple things to you and to others, where names and encounters are and remain signals definitively reached, plans and layers definitively acquired by the soul that is always more enriched, active and invading the space assigned to it (Costa, *Notebook n. 2*, in Piazza, 2018, p. 43).

Poetry becomes, therefore, a method of knowledge and mutual understanding, but also an ethical attitude that produces significant effects for the realization of the individual and for a quality of coexistence, going far beyond, thus, a functionality related only to the truth as performed on the stage**.**

The way to the awareness of one's own expressive means passes through the rediscovery of the poetic dimension of word and then to its expression. The whole effort to regain the mimetic attitude serves to modify the quality of human expression. It serves to allow the full expression of one's own word that is realized in the depths of relating. In fact, Costa, through body movement, wants the subject to gain contact with his own subjective feeling that lives in the encounter with the other.

Once the expression of word through body movement is turned on, the mimic method foresees the progressive lessening of body movement; therefore, word can finally be pronounced and made alive even without external body movement, because what counts is regained: the authentic and personal inner contact with the reality that one wants to express and that finds expression through us.

The pages that testify to Orazio Costa's teaching tell us of a man who, for his entire life, committed himself to the investigation of the mystery of human expression: a poetic mystery that only poetry could reveal. Poetry could then be argued as a way to recognize all reality, to gain the meaning of human expression as a service to the revelation of a larger mystery. Through the lens of Costa's vision, the nature of reality is poetry and poetry revels because it has in itself the mystery of reality (Piazza, 2018, pp. 46-60).

The greatness of poets (who are also the writers of plays) consists in grasping reality in its poetic state and delivering it to the world through 'word'. Costa gives the term 'temperie' to the state in which the author grasps and generates a work. Poets create in a 'temperie' in which they know how to make themselves messengers of a more mysterious word through their word. Actors do not know the 'temperie' in which an author has created the text, but through the words generated by the author's word they have the possibility of going backwards. By making oneself similar to the words that the author has penned, the actor seeks to re-experience the 'temperie' in which they were generated, nearly making oneself the author in the moment in which they exercised their word to reveal a larger word (Boggio, 2018, pp. 161-171). This research will finally allow an actor to fully carry out his work: to be, that is, *an angel of the word and a nuncio to himself and to the universe of a better self* (Costa, *Notebook 39*, in Piazza, 2018, p. 182).

This, that according to Costa must be the task of a human being who is an actor, shows us once again how much the reality of word is a mystery and that this mystery is not only for the actor to celebrate.

> Costa's neo-humanism insistently goes beyond the boundaries of a merely acting theory, pushing beyond the boundaries of the stage and pointing out a destiny for human beings – on stage and off – higher and more worthy, in the sign of the awareness of one's own infinite expressive means and of the need to nourish and wisely employ them as an act of love towards oneself and the world of natural and spiritual phenomena. (Piazza, 2018, p. 164).

The "Centro di avviamento all'espressione" created by Costa and financed by the Municipality of Florence from 1979 to 1988, was established to allow all interested people (therefore not only those who had aspirations as actors) to know and experience the *Metodo mimico* and to find through the way of *mimesis* a path to intensify the expression of their own word (Colli, 1996, pp. 128-131).

Concluding note

The human ontological-existential statute as a statute of relationship has the possibility to unfold by finding in the word an expression of *methexis* and an expression of *mimesis*.

In this study we have tried to show to what extent the re-evaluation of *mimesis* to investigate the mystery of word and of human expression can be fruitful, and how much this research can benefit from the work of those who have existentially faced the problem of human expression by exploring the heights of artistic creation.

It remains to be verified if a human and spiritual rebirth for the individual and for society can be nourished by an educational proposal focussed on the poetic dimension of word. That is, it remains to be verified to what extent mimesis is a path to humanisation. If *mimesis* is an encounter between us and the other that enables us *to live in love, in creation, in revelation*; if *mimesis* is a quality of relationship, if it is a relationship so intense that it enables the other to live in us and us to realize ourself through the other; if the intentional use of *mimesis* deepens and enriches the encounter with the other human being, with another poetical being; and, if, finally, all this is what nourishes the expression of our word, then, perhaps, it could be a good thing that philosophical-educational research engages in investigating, both theoretically and existentially, this path.

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