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NOISES YET TO KNOW -

POST-IRONICAL CONSEQUENCES OF RORTIAN

METAPHORIZING

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In 1913 Ezra Pound wrote a beautiful and brief poem entitled "*In a Station of the Metro*". Those brief and epigrammatic lines, almost in the form of a *haiku*, went:

> "*The apparition of these faces in the crowd / petals on a wet, black bough*".

I will take this poem as an excuse to discuss the role of metaphor in a given space of linguistic practices. In particular, I am interested in following the relations established by Richard Rorty between metaphor and irony, in the context of the characterization of his version of pragmatism. Those relations should be of use to enlighten aspects of the fourteen words that conforms Pound's small worldview and, at the same time, show some of the slides in meaning that must take place for the Rortian metaphorical-ironical compound to be of service to the general vision of the verbal practice in which such compound is inserted. Those slides, at the same time, will allow me to show some tensions regarding the Davidsonian approach to metaphor, to which Rorty is expressly affiliated, and will lead me towards a strictly tropological interpretation of the Rortian experiment. In that interpretation, two things will stand out. On the one hand, that Rorty's pragmatism has plenty to offer to tropology as a study of ordinary linguistic practices but, on the other hand, that tropology in the sense of a study of the interrelations between tropes can help overcome some of the limitations which, I assert, surround and threaten the Rortian interpretation of metaphor.

I - *Pragmatism, irony, metaphor*

In *"Solidarity or objectivity?"*[1] Richard Rorty mentions two of the fundamental contributions of pragmatism to the work of mining, obstructing and eventually overcoming the realistic and representational conception in philosophy which is yet nodal in our intellectual tradition. These contributions are part of a broad comparison between realistic-representational-"metaphysical" styles and those which are pragmatic-anti-representational, a comparison articulated with the purpose of revealing the enchantment of certain images which have held us captive and from which we had better now free ourselves.[2] In *"Solidarity…."* the contrast is established between the realist who yearns for a correspondence with reality and the pragmatist, who "do not require a metaphysic or an epistemology".[3] "For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible".[4] That desire then proceeds within the framework of a complex dialectic signed on the one hand by *ethnocentrism* (as an awareness of the limitations of any attempt to adopt a universal self-styled point of view) and on the other hand by *ironism* (as a questioning of the very idea of a "common sense" and as an inclination to novelty and experimentation, tolerance and self-doubt).[5] Ethnocentrism points to the fact that the pragmatist wishes to take their own community seriously (in that sense it is not compatible with relativism or ironist aestheticism which could be awarded to a decadent feeling towards one's own culture, such as Pound's). Ironism points to the awareness of the contingency of the spaces of

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[1] In Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, relativism and truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.21-33; from now on referred to as ORT. Other titles by the same author will be referred to as follows: CIS for *Contingency, irony and solidarity (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); EOH for *Essays on Heidegger and others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
[2] *Ibid*., p.22.
[3] *Ibidem.*
[4] *Ibid*. p.23.
[5] In CIS, pp.73-74.

experience and the horizons of interaction. Being it so, pragmatism "it takes away two sorts of metaphysical comfort (…) One is the thought that membership in our biological species carries with certain «rights»".[6] This idea is so fundamental that "we are troubled by any suggestion that «human nature» is not a useful moral concept".[7]

The second relief to be eliminated is the idea that "our community cannot wholly die" within a common drift which "leads all members of the species to converge to the same point (…and…) assures us that even if the Persians had won, the arts and sciences of the Greeks would sooner or later have appeared elsewhere".[8] The solace this image provides is that it assures us "not simply that there is a place prepared for our race in our advance, but also that we know quite a bit about what that place looks like".[9]

Pragmatism is then established as a vision oriented towards dissolving the idea that a "theory of the nature of man", which frees us from contingency and fate, might still come about. At this point Rortian argument gives the floor to Nietzsche and his famous *dictum* about truth as "a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and antromorphisms –in short a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically and which after long seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people".[10]

Early on we then observe the connection that Rorty builds between pragmatism, ironism and metaphor, in his attack to the remainders of the conception of *philosophy as-metaphysics-and-epistemology* and to the dubious practical and political consequences of such conception. Ironism turns out to be a meta-critical posture that allows us to conceive the outlines of reality as *a* reality, a peculiar self-distancing which reveals the contingency of the outgrowths and objectifications that configure our social and natural world. Metaphor is a type of practice exercised in the limit of those objectifications and which penetrates the wild continent of experimentation and overcoming of the fear to the lack of "convergence" of the practices, whichever they are. Metaphor is, then, "a call to change one's language and one's life, rather than a proposal about how to systematize either".[11] Pragmatism includes ironism and metaphoricity in the projection of its peculiar theoretical horizon about social world, language, political practices and the very place of philosophy.

In this sense Pound's verses come magnificently handy. Preliminarily we can appreciate a type of verbal practice oriented towards reflectively thematizing the act of *merely* riding the subway. The ordinary consciousness of the contemporary urban experience is questioned by means of a distancing mechanism, which allows for a double movement. On the one hand, it enables a view of reality as a putatively articulated outline, as *one* reality, yet emergent and disputed. On the other hand, it allows to relate the values assigned to certain elements of that reality with new (and unexpected) valences, with the purpose of generating -by the mere act of relating them- an effect of meaning which can recursively bring forward an alteration in that articulated reality. The reality of the metro stations, Pound tells us, is not given beforehand; it is not a natural cloak that covers our existence, but it refers to the dark side of a Modernity which eliminates other forms of life's pregnance. Once we have seen our counterparts as "petals on a wet, black bough", it should be difficult for us to ride the metro as if it were nothing. Once we have appreciated our society as a "black dying nature" such a distance has been created that we should alert us about any common sense that swirls around it.

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[6] In ORT, p.31.

[7] *Ibidem.*

[8] *Ibidem.*

[9] *Ibidem*.

[10] *Ibid.* p.32.

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[11] EOH, p.13.

This connection between ironical distancing and metaphorical practice is relevant even when there is not an ounce of pragmatism in Pound. It shows us in any case some of the conditions that must occur for such practice to come about. At the same time Pound himself exemplifies some of the dangers that cross the consequences of that metaphorizing and show the difficulty of sticking to the metaphor-irony scheme in the Rortian sense: Pound's "unfamiliar noises" appear as a form of distancing regarding a given reality, but their epigrammatic form is nothing but the announcement of the ramifications necessary to structure a commitment which is not very pragmatic towards *another* reality. In which case the practice of metaphor is no more than the advance of an ontological commitment regarding which other practices will come to represent degrees of progress and development on the bases established preliminarily by metaphor. The black nature and the dark side of Modernity do not represent, in these lines by Pound, more than the prologue to an attitude that asserts the rising costs of mass society and the inauthentic forms of sociability that it offers. Although elided in the argument, we easily find what it is that Pound could commit to: the control of mass society and the ideal which aspires to the overcoming of the modern perversion of nature. About this, Pound would not be ironic nor would he continue to express a desire for experimentation in the signification process. At this point, the metaphorical-ironical compound also allows us to show in what sense Pound was not fully a pragmatist in the Rortian sense, which is of fundamental interest for what follows. The ironist consciousness of the boundaries of Modernity's "common sense and metaphysics" does not turn one into a pragmatist. Something else is required for such thing to occur.

II – Historicism, romanticism and the repudiation of teleology

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, and like in most of his work, Rorty exposes us to a lengthy path built on a conflict signed by a fatal contradiction. In this case the polemic mode is exercised in regards to the intention of combining the public and the private, the fact that there is an attempt to show that "the springs of private fulfillment and of human solidarity are the same".[12] The desire for private perfection as a power of self-transfiguration into a form of independent life and the wish for a fairer, freer human community are shown as *opposites* when a perspective attempts to link one with the other, postulating an unlikely convergence between self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, between *Trotsky and the wild orchids*. But neither philosophy, nor any other theoretical discipline will ever allow for that, in the form of the articulation of an "all-encompassing vocabulary" or "ultimate lexicon"[13] that incorporates both yearnings. Ironism is related to the ability to recognize such impossibility. Ironists are "sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance".[14] *Historicism* presumes that at seizing that at different times various lexicons are enforced "it becomes hard to think that that vocabulary is somehow already out there in the world"[15], and we rather proceed to see lexicons as such, not as paths that lead to the final delimitation of reality's outlines.

This "non-teleological conception of intellectual history" is the one Rorty expands in "*The contingency of language*",[16] on mainly Davidsonian basis. The development and imposition of new lexicons does not refer to two discontinuous signification universes (the literal *versus* the metaphorical, the convergent and "rational" *versus* the divergent and irrational), but to two opposite points in the continuous spectrum of

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[12] CIS, p.xiii.
[13] *Ibid*., p.73.
[14] *Ibid*., p.xv.
[15] *Ibid*., p. 6.
[16] *Ibid*, pp.3-22.

linguistic practices, those from which the habitual and unusual use of marks and sounds are drawn.[17]

This non-teleological conception is no other but the "romantic history of culture",[18] that in which on the ground of a drama of Darwinian discontinuities and ruptures, the achievement of imagination, divergence and experiment is consummated. Pragmatism then rides between a futurism of experimentation, trial and fallibilist consciousness of the possibility of error on the one hand, and the historicist consciousness, full of discontinuities in the contingent development of a culture, on the other hand. It is because we surreptitiously tend to "generate meaning" by eliminating contingency and fallibilism by dint of "necessary guidelines" and "profound ways of catchment" that pragmatism as a perspective is so necessary to frame even the most radical of the practices of ironical distancing and metaphoric self-absorption. Teleology as a metaphysical aftertaste is what pragmatism allows to approach, and it is for this reason that the metaphorical phenomenon is where the contrast between the teleological vision and the pragmatist vision of culture is most expressed. The former is reductionist and considers metaphor to be potentially derivative and paraphrasable, as a device oriented towards an end specifiable *a priori*. The latter is expansionistic and considers metaphor as a fundamental vehicle to arbitrate between lexicons for reasons which are purely practical, situated, interpretable *a posteriori*. Facing the idea that a lexicon is a "more adequate" representation of the world, stands the idea that a lexicon is a constellation of devices that respond to various and changing purposes.[19]

An *ultimate lexicon* is defined by Rorty as the set of words we use to frame our projects, doubts, hopes and desires, and in front of which no other set rises unless it

is in a recursive and circular manner. "Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force".[20] Ironism is defined facing such lexicons: ironists have radical, permanent doubts about those lexicons; they notice that the arguments they can provide do not consolidate or eliminate those doubts; and they replace those lexicons not for reasons related to their adequacy or teleology, but because they aspire to "playing the new off against the old".[21] The opposite of ironism is "common sense", the "metaphysical" strategy that does not aim to re-describe reality but which "rather analyzes the old descriptions with the help of other old descriptions". Once more we find an ambiguous path in Pound, if we are to follow this cultural map proposed by Rorty: surely poetry clashes with common sense, probably also presenting it as a confrontation of the old and the new, but rarely remains in the ironic horizon. Rather, it uses metaphor as a springboard to try to outline and influence the common sense of the future. The poetic imagination of the present is meant to be the vector which *reflects* the outlines of the upcoming reality, of a world still to be made. In this sense, it does not necessarily reach the point in which the very idea of "reflection" is abandoned.

In this concatenation we perceive that in the heart of the ironist practice there is the metaphorical strategy, but not any one. It is not, as Aristotle would say, about knowing the unusual and strange thanks to the natural and known, but rather about doing the opposite.[22] This entails exceeding the cognitivist horizon of the theoretical tradition surrounding metaphor, and inserting it under the problem of *romanticism*. Romanticism appears as a criticism of the inauthenticity

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[17] *Ibid.*, p.17.
[18] *Ibid.,* p.19.
[19] *Ibid.*, p.21.

[20] *Ibid.*, p.73.
[21] *Ibidem*.
[22] The cognitivist core of Aristotle's conception is expressed in the famous *dictum:* "Now we do not know the meaning of strange words, and proper terms we know already. It is metaphor, therefore, that above all produces this effect" (*Rhetoric;* 1410b).

of relationships and as a growing conscience of subjective alienation. A very limited (but useful) definition of romanticism considers it the postulation of a qualitative individualism as part of a regenerated sociability (which matches the map of "*Trotskys and wild orchids*" Rorty permanently makes us work with). How much regeneration and how much subjective "quality" are required and how far away we stand from all this is part of what leads in the answer to outline the vast spectrum of possible romanticisms, from that conservative one that intends to return to the Middle Ages, to the romantic aftertastes in Marxist criticism of the subjective and objective destruction entailed by capitalism. In the meantime, a vast stretch of romanticism is presented as a space of "self-creation" and self-affirmation, as *self-identification by exteriorization*, that is, as catchment of the self by means of an object where what is regarded as most personal is placed. This process of self-development and self-awareness is nothing but a *bildung*, a developmental account in which we get to know ourselves in the process of *losing-and-finding ourselves.*[23] The Rortian narration of the "romantic history of culture" is no other thing than having got lost in the marasmus of the "mirror of nature" and of the longing for a metaphysics and an epistemology which respond to the permanent form of things, and having found ourselves in the consciousness of the puerility of such longings. Once more we can ask ourselves how much teleology is there confined in the articulation of a *bildung* (and pitifully, the answer should be plenty), but even so we can now reconsider the type of metaphorical practice presumed in romanticism (and in *this* romanticism in particular): metaphor is a process of self-identification opposed to the consciousness of knowing oneself to be estranged,

lost. It is a gesture of *agency* opposed to the mere passivity of things and which therefore constitutes an answer to the ironical conscience of knowing oneself to be living a reality that is not such, and to the ironical gesture which dissolves that conscience into a pluralistic tolerance of the massive spectrum of realities that might be the case.

The existential complexity involved in this process of self-identification by means of a violent (and unpredictable) history of exteriorizations and wanderings helps to understand why metaphor cannot be for Rorty what cognitivists such as Max Black say it is. Metaphor is not a "method of knowledge by scaffolding" which helps us understand the strange through what we know. In fact what is implied and questioned in the process is ourselves, any sense of what is ours, any idea of a reality we can respond to and on which we can intervene somehow. The importance of this *romantic* element is crucial: it helps to understand why the history of culture is discontinuous, why it does not *converge* in an ideal or ultimate goal, why it entails the disavowal (professed, at least) of teleology and why along the way there is a constant attempt to recreate a sense of unity - which cannot be such- between Trotsky and the wild orchids, between the sense of belonging to an accomplished and consummated sociability and the feeling of plenitude in the form of an individuality qualitatively different from the existing one. These romantic credentials can help understand some of the virtues of Rortian pragmatism, but they also make some of its disadvantages predictable. But in order to clarify this, we must further examine the conception of language required to support this *romantic-a-teleological horizon* of culture.

III – Language, traffic and general economy of the exchange of marks and sounds

The non-teleological horizon of culture unfolds within a vision of language as a sphere of traffics and exchanges

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[23] On the problem of romanticism and its definition there is an endemic disagreement. For my purposes, it is enough to follow Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre in their classic *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). There I find a useful classification and delimitation of the problem. On *bildung* I naturally resort to Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975).

valid in context, which delimit a variety of instantiation spectra for those exchanges in which both the most trivial continuity and the most radical rupture are possible. Those spectra allow us to deal with the grasp of the impossibility of matching private perfection and collective emancipation, and make room for the idea that culture is the renovated and frustrated struggle of trying to bind both dimensions. Now, for this permanent glides from culture in a broad sense to metaphorical practices in a strict sense to be legitimate, it must be noted that they happen within a unified orientation of verbal and non-verbal behavior. The fact that this spectral dynamic of non-teleologically oriented continuities and ruptures takes place within a single sphere is emphasized by the utterly Davidsonian inscription of this vision of language and, more specifically, of what the metaphoric transit entails.

The starting point rests on the fact that Davidson's conception of language

> ask us to think of human beings trading marks and noises to accomplish purposes. We are to see this linguistic behavior as continuous with nonlinguistic behavior and to see both sorts of behavior as making sense just insofar as we can describe them as attempts to fulfill given desires in the light of given beliefs.[24]

The aim of presenting this vision consists of avoiding the *reification* of language, the belief that it is something which has extremes, which forms a limited whole or which can become a differentiated object of study. Language is not an object, but a space we inhabit or an organ "with which we come into direct contact with our environment",[25] and it has become a form of "propositional perception".[26] "There is no such thing as a

language apart from the sounds and marks people make and the habits and expectations that go with them".[27] Language is, then, a space of social behavior stabilized around certain practices, practices which conform networks lacking cores or determination structures, and which can always be redescribed, recontextualized and relocated inside another network of social practices.

That language does not mediate or "represent" as an epistemic intermediation is evident from this Davidsonian filiation of Rortian criticism to the idea of a "language-object". But some alterations begin to take place with the attempt to inscribe Davidsonian metaphor within a historicist, romantic, non-teleological vision of the ironist cultural *praxis* in a broad sense.

Rorty begins his discussion on metaphor by presenting the virtues and limitations of a cognitivist *a la* Hesse scheme of metaphor. The problem with cognitivism is that it is not sufficiently radical[28] and, as we saw, it does not help to understand *but only a part* of what we do through metaphor (or *what metaphor does for us*). The use of Davidson is explained here since it is of service to eliminate the reference to secondary meaning, metaphorical meaning, or meaning derived by opposition to the idea of primary meanings that the metaphoric "torsion" would come to parasitize. The explanatory uselessness of such "metaphorical meanings" manifests with respect to the non-cognitive components of metaphor and to its non-sentence aspects -in the form of "non sentential phrases (…which…) change ourselves and our patterns of action, without ever coming to express belief or desires"[29]-. And all together they conform a perspective in which metaphor lies beyond the reach of semantics and of the "reticulated" conceptions of language. As part of the "study of the use of language", semantics covers the regularities in which "the explanatory force of standard

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[24] EOH, p.58.

25 Donald Davidson, *Truth, language and history* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p.131; from now on referred to as TLH. Other works by the same author will be referred to as follows: ITI for *Essays into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); SIO for *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

[26] *Ibid*., p.135.

[27] *Ibid*., p.131.

[28] ORT, p.163.

[29] *Ibid*., p.164.

sense" is expressed. Where the regularities give way to the massive disturbances, neither semantics nor the very notion of meaning makes a relevant contribution.[30] What pleases Rorty is the Davidsonian restraint to "discovering the sort of behavioral regularities in which a radical interpreter would be interested",[31] without venturing hypotheses about the underlying forces at work. At this point is where Rorty has suspicions about the models *a la* Black, which understand metaphor as a process of interaction between "systems of associated commonplaces", process whose workings can be described. By placing the irregular and unpredictable uses of language -the violent self-exteriorizations as romantic identifications of the previous section- under a regulatory framework of rules or conventions, the most relevant aspect of the metaphorical phenomenon is lost, which is the act of blowing up those frameworks.

The Rortian-Davidsonian dogma reads: "nothing in existence prior to the metaphor's occurrence is sufficient to understand the metaphorical use. That is just why we call it «metaphorical»".[32] Understanding a metaphor cannot mean "placing it under a preceding scheme", because the very idea of metaphor works on the impossibility of a reduction to antecedence. This incomprehensibility does not prevent the generation of knowledge from the metaphor; it only makes it impossible to elaborate the implausible notion of "metaphorical cognitive content". The metaphor does not generate knowledge *per se*, but it can do so, and it is part of the course of action not as an elusive object which carries a precious content, but as an event which has effects on the agents. Metaphor then constitutes a type of action which is non-predictable in virtue of a preceding theory, which can cause beliefs but hardly work sufficiently as reasons for them. When metaphors, in this conception, are imbricated in the network of beliefs in relations of justification, they are no longer, in

spite of Hesse, Lakoff, Black or Searle, live metaphors, but lifeless, and their *status* is not more relevant to the analysis of metaphoricity in general than any other statement is.[33] "The process of becoming stale, familiar, unparadoxical and platitudinous is the process by which such noises cross the line from «mere» causes of belief to reasons for belief".[34] When the noise of metaphor becomes familiar, we are not strictly facing a metaphor any more. Metaphor pays for its success with its life. When we do not see it but as part of "the" reality, the metaphor has achieved its mission, but it is no longer a metaphor. This is extremely important, because it shows us the tension inherent to this concept of metaphor: from the mottled ensemble of discontinuous practices always breaks off a small body which recursively manages to affect the delimitation of a given sense of reality. Such a thing occurs permanently and it is part of what we witness daily in the great traffic of meanings of ordinary speech. The general economy of the exchange of marks and sounds exposes us to these metaphorizations as new proposals which can affect the rest of our modes of action. The life and death of metaphors shows us, again, the resurgence of teleology in a bounded version: practices are carried out *for* and *as an embodiment* of a certain inherence. It is inherent in metaphor to shake our ontology, dream the language, but this is a functional characterization which allows to understand metaphor as a form of the recurrent linguistic practice, and therefore although the "non-teleological horizon of culture" encourages us to describe retrospectively the past emergencies of unfamiliar noises, the generic understanding of the phenomenon encourages us to characterize its recurrence in projective terms, in particular as "noises yet to know".

But curiously, this can only be done as long as we see such characterization less as an internal element of cultural *praxis* and more as the type of interpretative

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[30] *Ibidem*.
[31] *Ibid*., p.165.
[32] *Ibid*., p.166.

[33] *Ibid*., p.169n,
[34] *Ibid.,* p.172.

maneuver which we perform *ethnographically* to make others intelligible. This entails casting a new light on the Davidsonian filiation of Rortian metaphorizing in order to reconsider it: we interpret metaphorically within a radical hermeneutics, when as a result of an ongoing triangulation and by virtue of the *principle of charity* we assign metaphoricity to certain statements if we are to make others and their verbal practices understandable, under the common belonging to a "society of minds" that share one same world.

It is not for Pound to appraise himself as a "metaphorizer". Rather it is us, attempting to comprehend his verbal practice, who *attribute "metaphor"* to Pound's behaviour. With this, we analytically place in a more precise place the spectrum of the metaphorical as part of the range of the attributions of interpretation: a metaphor is not a "thing", but a way to designate a certain verbal behaviour, a certain form of intervention in the linguistic practice, but this results in a criticism of the broad role that metaphor is supposed to have when seen in a "historicist, romantic", that is to say, Rortian, way. In the end, because metaphor operates Davidsonianly, as Rorty says, then it cannot do everything that is preached about it Rortianly.

IV – Metaphor, interpretation and the tropological horizon

What did we want metaphor for? The place of the problem of metaphor in Davidson's philosophy of language -philosophy to which Rorty expressly subscribes- is the following: since what Davidson is interested in is showing how it is possible to interpret starting from a unified theory of meaning and action, the resulting indetermination of Davidsonian interpretation, like its Quinean counterpart,[35] will then forward to an open process, in which the "translation" will be fixed in relation to the common aspects shared between speaker and interpreter. "Indeterminacy of meaning or translation", Davidson says, "does not represent a failure to capture significant distinctions; it marks the fact that certain apparent distinctions are not significant. If there is indeterminacy, it is because when all the evidence is in, alternative ways of stating the facts remain open".[36] This settles a very different starting point for what we have been dealing with: the consideration of "metaphorical" linguistic events will be less in relation to its alleged intrinsic metaphoricity -by the fact that "something" "is" a metaphor in a more or less permanent manner- than as a result of an undetermined, recursive process through which an understanding of the generic behavior of the speakers is attempted. The fact that it is an "open" process should encourage us to distance ourselves from the consequences attributed to this or that linguistic practice, if the intention is to isolate them from the permanent reset of the interpretive process.

In this framework, "the meaning (interpretation) of a sentence is given by assigning the sentence a semantic location in the pattern of sentences that comprise the language".[37] Now, what can be the meaning of sentences and expressions whose function consists precisely in breaking the sentence pattern and its system of semantic locations? As it has been stated, Davidson's motto consists of avoiding the appeal to "secondary or properly metaphoric meanings", in the belief of the explanatory nullity of such notions.

The purpose of such types of "metaphorical or secondary" signification seems to be operating as containers or vehicles to "conduct ideas, although unusual". Their defect is that they fall on the argument which divides between schemes and contents, what Davidson called "third dogma of empiricism", that

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35 Willard van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.26 and pp. 73-79; from now on referred to as WO.

36 ITI, p.154. cf. WO, p.78.
37 ITI, p.225.

situation where a common ground is recognized, in front of which different alternative schemes are built; there is, then, the given in an uninterpreted manner, "the uncategorized contents of experience",[38] the registry or observation, on the one hand, and the theory, schema and worldview, on the other hand. Metaphor and its paraphrase share, supposedly, the uncategorized contents, before which they stand as mutually replaceable "visions".

But additionally, according to Davidson, there is a misunderstanding of the place of metaphor within the linguistic practice, in the framework of that unified theory of meaning and action. Metaphor "is something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences and depends entirely on the ordinary meanings of those words and hence on the ordinary meanings of the sentences they comprise".[39] In the position of the radical interpreter, and facing a metaphorical practice, the postulation of secondary meanings will not result in a better interpretation. "*What metaphors mean*" proceeds, then, to the *destruction* of several canonical ways of interpreting the metaphorical *praxis*: the implied simile or explicit similarity model is rejected,[40] and so is the idea of an "extended" meaning, a "properly metaphorical ambiguity" or the general conception that inside metaphor coexist or are involved two uses (hence the ambiguity) or two types of meanings (one literal, immediate, and another figurative). Also questioned is the notion that metaphor rests on novelty or on the ability to cause surprise in the use of terms.[41]

Hence, we are forced to arrive at the paradoxical conclusion that the meaning of metaphors depends on the literal, ordinary meanings of the words. "The ordinary meaning in the context of use is odd enough to

prompt us to disregard the question of literal truth",[42] which refers less to the meaning of the words than to the *way* in which they are used. The theories of "metaphoric meaning" or "metaphoric truth" cannot help to understand metaphor as long as they focus on alleged hidden meanings and not on the extraordinary uses of ordinary meanings: "what distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use".[43] The criticism of the notion of metaphoric paraphrase that Black can subscribe to is lost when metaphor is considered a cognitive vehicle (of metaphorical meanings, but meanings nonetheless). "If a metaphor has a special cognitive content, why should it be so difficult or impossible to discover it?" Here we reach Davidson's key point: "the usual view wants to hold that a metaphor does something no plain prose can possibly do and, on the other hand, it wants to explain what a metaphor does by appealing to a cognitive content", precisely what the common prose is meant to do.[44] If metaphor is cognitive, it cannot be as mysterious as it is claimed to be. Recreating the feeling of a metaphorical *extra* demands going further. For that to open, "we must give up the idea that a metaphor carries a message, that it has a content or meaning (except, of course, its literal meaning)".[45]

The understanding of the metaphorical phenomenon begins, rather, when we appreciate that a way of using words leads to certain effects.[46] A metaphor does its job by means of other intermediaries, and it makes it clear that it is not enough to cast on it a certain "interpreted content", but rather grasp that "there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character. When we try to say what a metaphor «means», we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention".[47]

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[38] SIO, p.40.
[39] ITI, p.247.
[40] *Ibid*., p.249, p.252.
[41] *Ibid*., p.251.

[42] *Ibid*., p.258.
[43] *Ibid.,* p.259.
[44] *Ibid*., p.260.
[45] *Ibidem*.
[46] *Ibid*., p.261.
[47] *Ibid*., p.262.

We then see metaphor as an event, and we insert it interpretatively in a map of events, with the precaution to know that there are no maps of events as fixed locations, but rather as global hypotheses that face a recurring process of triangulations, spontaneous hypotheses, partial modifications and various reconsiderations. What Pound's verses mean will depend of the diverse geographies where one intends to include the worlds delimited "in a station of the metro". Pound's infinite contexts -the defying experience of mass society, decadence, the elite's fear of the crowds, the ghost of Marxism, the full development of industrial capitalism, symbolism, the impact of romanticism, the crisis of late 19th century realisms, the myth of oracular poetry and many other elements- appear as resources at the time of an interpretation which tries to characterize a verbal practice in the shape of the writing of a poem about the metro in 1913.

Here the various Davidsonian filiations are linked: his interest in articulating a unified theory of meaning and action and his repudiation of the idea of language as a discrete object within a human behavior split between the verbal and the non-verbal. "When we look at the natural world we share with others, we do not lose contact with ourselves, but rather acknowledge membership in a society of minds".[48] The metaphorical practice is a way of acting inside that society of minds, a particular way which brings about certain problems of interpretation, which the model of *cognitive contents encrypted in the metaphor* does not contribute to understand at all.

But what helps us gain distance from the cognitivism of a Black or of Mary Hesse, also works to distance ourselves from the crypto-teleological, romantic and historicist horizon a Rorty interested in erecting metaphor as the model for the cultural practice oriented towards rupture, self-creation and self-exteriorization. Once Davidson

allows us to conceptually locate the *status* of the metaphorical device, it is also plausible that such thing enables a more integrate view of the tropological phenomenon in general, of which both metaphor an irony (two old companions of the Rortian project) are a part.

Tropology consists of the analysis of tropes (figures of speech or "turns") such as metaphor, irony, synecdoche and metonymy. In fact tropology has operated in general as a discipline endemically faced against itself regarding the reductive impulses which intend to configure it, or rather inside a polarity around metaphor and metonymy (Roman Jakobson is a paradigmatic example of this), or following a classic quaternary mold (in a long lineage which goes back to Giambattista Vico and continues in the XX century in authors such as Erich Auerbach, Northrop Frye and Hayden White).[49]

The dangers for the "tropologist" -as an analyst of what is elided and trafficked in the ordinary linguistic use- begin when he thinks that his vocabulary is more than that, when he estimate that it is an ultimate context of signification, a *grapholect* or the type of ultimate lexicon from which he cannot allow himself to take distance, to contextualize or narrow it in its use, power and extensions. And he carries on when he exercise a sort of analysis which consists of merely pointing out where there is metaphor and where there is irony, as if qualifying and assigning attributes to objects and linguistic practices were a lasting achievement. Taken as great cultural units ("ascent and downfall of metaphor") or as mega-procedures on the basis of an entire

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[48] SIO, p.219.

[49] Two classical examples of the use of tropology can be found in Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) and in Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), although in the latter the implications of this tropological adoption are more explicit in *The Great Code* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1982) and in *Words with Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1990).

tradition, the tropological operators begin to lose some of their richness. To a certain extent such thing is inevitable, but when semantic domains subject to operational intersection because of metaphor (for example) are as vast as "capitalism" or "industrialization" we are at risk of thinking that we have found the *ultimate context* which allows us to describe and place each "verbal artifact" in a "map tropological locations". Without a doubt we can place Pound in the anti-industrial and anti-capitalist hindrances of proto-fascist conservatism, so that "black nature" and "progress" appear as two macro semantic fields that refer without further ado to *the dark side of the Revolution Era*; such has been the interpretation of "In a Station of the Metro" I played with in this text. But as White himself has noted, "tropological location" is contextual and barely the beginning -not the end- of the analytical labor, which must then proceed to carefully clear and survey the set of operations carried out through the tropes, that are far from referring to a unitary context, a univocal direction, a clear and outlined commitment with this or that point of the range in question.

The understanding of tropes unilaterally as differentiated instances (metaphor versus metonymy or irony against metaphysics) usually comes hand by hand with the inability to perceive their interrelated aspect. In fact, the further we appreciate the interrelated aspect of tropes as a vocabulary of analysis of the verbal practice, the more we realize that it is impossible to "stop" the course, or proceed into a "purely ironist" or "metaphorical" type of reading. In this sense tropological vocabulary proves itself especially refined at the time of dealing with these compromises with divergent realities, such as the ones that might emerge in the attempt to question the progressive aspect of subways and the very notion of *progress.*

As a vocabulary to follow the a-teleological exchange of marks and sounds, tropology unfolds as a tool which is entirely compatible with a pragmatist vision of language. However, it collides with the Rortian "Romantic" elements which, to make matters worse, resuscitate teleology while compromising metaphor with a limited type of self-identification, emancipation and existential affirmation task. Although it is true that metaphor *can* do that, it is not so that it *must* do it within Rortian bounded ironism. Like Pound's case makes patent, it rather occurs that the metaphorical affirmation expresses a sort of rejection of the ironic, passive, distance state of relative grasp of the given sense of reality, even when the rejection requires the precedence of that state that is rejected.

That said, *Rorty's paradox* lies in the following idea: while it is true that a crystallized metaphor which has been incorporated into common sense is no longer a metaphor, it is still true that a tolerant, pluralistic and liberal worldview that ironically encourages metaphorization permanently renders us to state of identifications which end with ironism. *When we metaphorize we are no longer ironists.* The complexity of the tropological transit frames a process marked by the permanent reintroduction of disputed mobiles and trafficked valences, which do not have a necessary conceptual link with the ironist's horizon. The danger that the new metaphorization might forward us into a new "metaphysic" stage is not solved by encouraging a generic ironism impossible to sustain, but by monitoring the interrelations between the tropes in question. The economy and flexibility of the metaphoric statements -for example in the form of a criticism of modernity sustained in just fourteen words- is often followed by "metaphysical" stages which explicit what was merely suggested in the metaphor. When making something explicit, in general, the metaphorical economy and polysemy are lost, but the alleged idea that it constitutes a realistic way of characterizing the environment is enriched. For example, when Pound makes his anti-modernism explicit, becoming blatantly proto-fascist and committing to a glaringly conservative projection of

social reality. In this context, ironism is exercised anti-economically when applied to the metaphoric protocol, being much luckier when its dissolving action is performed on rivets, epicycles and *ad hoc* hypotheses metonymically and synecdochically conformed. Ironism, then, is not a generic virtue, a designator of a specific cultural defect or the north of a form of interaction. Rather, it is a disarticulating device for the teleologies where the metaphoric identifications send us when they are developed in weaves of epicycles.

The ungrateful task of the radical interpreter is to look at the great bazaar of verbal and non-verbal culture and rebuild the global intelligibility of those acts without assuming comfortingly (metaphysically?) that that great bazaar is to converge in its metaphorical practices with what one values most. Or, in other words, far from committing substantially to certain elements brought up in the past by unfamiliar noises, asserting the formal relevance of the fact that the tropological and pragmatist linguistic horizon invariably predicts the promise of infinite noises yet to know, that we will somehow make our own. And this will be so whether language is projected in the direction of reverie and the realization of the best of the species, or verbal imagination enters us in a geography where it is ourselves who are dreamt by our own nightmares.