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In Search of a Feminist Theory of Expression

Shall I take thee, the Poet said
To the propounded word?
Be stationed with the Candidates
Till I have finer tried—

The Poet searched Philology
And was about to ring
For the suspended Candidate
There came unsummoned in—

That portion of the Vision
The Word applied to fill
Not unto nomination
The Cherubim reveal—

    —Emily Dickinson, *Shall I take thee, the Poet said*

Abstract

In the *Tractactus Logico Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein concludes that what cannot be spoken about is better left unsaid, which would correspond to everything that is not scientific language susceptible of being formalized in the propositional framework. It is not until *Philosophical Investigations* that he will find the formula of the "expression" taken in an encompassing sense with its notion of "seeing aspects". For his part, in his course "Le problème de la parole", Merleau-Ponty, elaborates a reflection on language that begins with the consideration of the scientific and logical naivety of language, in relation to Saussure's linguistics, and ends with the comparison between Proust and Stendhal. In this last part, he proposes that literature, as a creative language and an expressive operation, is both true life, connected with the ontological foundation of what exists, and phenomenology that

shows the institution of that life. In both authors, the logical consideration is overwhelmed by the expressive power of language. Our contribution will make a comparison between Wittgenstein's and Merleau-Ponty's reflections on language and expressiveness. With this, we will seek to propose the bases of a feminist theory of expression, that is, a theory that seeks to show the particularity of female expressiveness.

Keywords: feminism, expression, poetry, phenomenology, life

In this paper, we seek to draw on the resources of the philosophy of language that emerges from the intersection of Wittgenstein's and Merleau-Ponty's perspectives in order to establish the basis for a feminist theory of expression. Our main objective is to constitute a feminist method of interpretation that will allow us to apprehend the particularity of feminine expression in literary production and its subversive value in a philosophy of expression. First of all, we will point out the limits that both philosophers find in the representationalist perspective of language. This perspective, which has logical and scientific implications, leaves aside the claims of legitimacy of the female voice. In this sense, a feminist perspective allows us to broaden the epistemic claims of a theory of expression. In a second step, we will propose a phenomenological perspective that takes as its basis the first-person experience. We will articulate this perspective on the basis of the possible dialogue between Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty on the unity of language and life. We see here a possibility of understanding the link between the particularity of the feminine voice and the unity of expression and life. Far from being a solipsistic language, feminine expression opens up spaces of subjective legitimacy with a constitutive dimension in the social imaginary, which gives it a subversive potentiality.

1. *The limits of representation*

In both Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, we find a reflection on experience which, when it tries to be expressed, is capable of going beyond the logical or scientific level of language. This level is the

representational level. This expressive overflow, far from being insignificant in discerning the depths of the experience of the first person, is evoked by each author in a different way. It is at the crossroads of both perspectives that we find a fruitful contribution to a feminist perspective on language.

With respect to Wittgenstein, in his *Tractactus Logico-Philosophicus*, he proposes a logical view of language. This perspective seeks to reduce the complexity of experience to logical structures that can be understood by the structures of reason (in scientific and propositional terms). But this complexity exceeds the logical framework, which leads to an *aporia*:

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)
>
> He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright. (TLP: 6.54)

In this very last part of this book, Wittgenstein states, at the same time, that what cannot be spoken about is better to remain silent, and that he has led us to the top of a ladder in order to destroy it. What cannot be spoken about is what cannot be represented. It remains in the realm of silence. That is, mystical, political or ethical expressions, but also the ultimate foundations of the logical structure of language, insofar as they are shown but not said, and "what *can* be shown, *cannot* be said" (TLP: 4.1212). This invites us to think that there is a dynamism proper to language that exceeds the logical or scientific framework, or even more, that it is necessary to go beyond this structure to understand the foundations of language.

It would seem that the purpose of this book, which begins by developing a logical representationalist structure of truth, goes beyond the realm of true and false, and touches the experiential depths of the self. In that sense, we agree with Michael Morris and Julian Dodd on the following: "We suggest that the point of the *Tractatus* is not that its readers should have come to apprehend some set of truths, but that they should have come to 'see the world rightly'" (2009: 263). To Michael Morris and Julian Dodd, Wittgenstein exhorts us here to take a mystical and ethical

perspective on the world. How to express this perspective from Wittgenstein's philosophy? To understand this, we will have to go beyond the *Tractactus* in the next part of this paper, in which we will emphasise the experiential dimension of language to which Wittgenstein's thought gives significant attention.

At the same time, in his course "Le problème de la parole" (2020), Merleau-Ponty invites us to think about language from a logic, scientific and structuralist perspective. But this perspective is quickly called into question. Merleau-Ponty wonders whether the idea of the inherent nature of our logical categories in our language constitutes a problem of historicism. He resolved this suspicion by making thought (his capacity to question) as linked to *speech* and not to words or signs. *Speech* is the realisation of which thought is only a promise. He evokes, first of all, the schools of Vienna and Warsaw, for whom logic is only the theory of science as language understood as universal pure syntax. For Merleau-Ponty, not everything that is clear is analytical or coherent in the first beginning. Analytical clarity is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition: "There is an 'arbitrary reduction' in the functioning of the mind, a blindness to meaning, and it is this imperfection that is attributed to language" (Merleau-Ponty 2020: 51). Logicians, Merleau-Ponty notes, speak Indo-European languages. To logicism, he contrasts the very conditions for the appearance of meaning. It characterises the dialectic of language as the fact that in wanting to go beyond syntax, one obeys one of them the most. It is then by placing oneself at the heart of language that one truly believes it: "One needs objectification in order to perceive the facticity of naïve speech and find pure speech" (ibid.: 52).

Merleau-Ponty presents, in this sense, the notion of speech, based on Saussure, as an individual execution of the facts of language and as a support of the "language-object", the environment shared of the individual and the institution and of the facts of thought and the facts of language. This perspective is close to the representationist view of the language of the *Tractactus*. According to a Saussurian perspective on language, meaning is a certain emptiness or gap, and its expression is in an oblique relationship to it. The act of speaking is to articulate signs in order to render differences in

meaning, which would not be a content possessed. However, certain facts show that Saussure's structuralism does not give sufficient consideration to the phenomenon of speech: the acquisition of speech as a transformation of the relationship to others and to the world; and the exercise of speech in the writer. For the writer, the structure of his mental landscape becomes "the organising principle of a diacritical system that communicates it" (ibid.: 200). The originality of the creative word thought from the example of the writer allows us to establish a problem: the tension between intellectual possession or acquisition and the impossibility of possessing an idea. Indeed, one can have an order of meanings and logical essences. This raises the problem of the institution of language, which will be presented in the second part of this essay.

In both perspectives, we find a consideration of language that challenges the limits of knowledge. Precisely, feminist thought demands that we go beyond those limits that have historically excluded the female voice. As Alice Crary proposes,

> Feminist theory is devoted to making the lives of woman intelligible, and it begins with the recognition that doing so requires shedding light on forces that contribute to the social subjection of women. Some of its most significant contributions to our understanding of women's lives take the form of descriptions of how established bodies and practices of knowledge harm women. Many of these descriptions are specifically concerned with ways in which women have been excluded from knowledge. (2002: 97-98)

Feminist theory allows us to question Wittgenstein's and Merleau-Ponty-Ponty's theories of language in a more radical and fundamental way. It is no longer simply a matter of going beyond the logical or syntactic structure of language to perceive its epistemological complexity, but of pointing out what has been silenced and excluded in this structure. We believe that feminine poetics allows us to realise this intention of feminist theory.

We could show various literary examples in which the female voice is situated in this sphere that exceeds the logical limit of language, without ceasing to be a legitimate producer of truth. We have chosen here, however, two poetic examples, one by Silvia Plath, the other by Alejandra Pizarnik.

I AM VERTICAL

But I would rather be horizontal.
I am not a tree with my root in the soil
Sucking up minerals and motherly love
So that each March I may gleam into leaf,
Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed
Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularly painted,
Unknowing I must soon unpetal.
Compared with me, a tree is immortal
And a flower-head not tall, but more startling,
And I want the one's longevity and the other's daring
[…].

(Plath, 1999: 67)

In this poem, Plath does not merely evoke metaphors that express her experience of reality but situates the poetic voice in a paradoxical realm between the real and her desires that exceeds the logical: she is vertical, when she would like to be horizontal, like the universe that hides behind the tree and the flower. This horizontal universe has roots that allow us to think about the foundations of life that exceed the limits of the real but are apprehensible by desire. At this point, Plath's verses meet those of Pizarnik:

THE WORD THAT HEALS

While waiting for a world to be unearthed by language, someone is singing about the place where silence is formed. Later it'll be shown that just because it displays its fury doesn't mean the sea—or the world—exists. In the same way, each word says what it says—and beyond that, something more and something else.

(Pizarnik, 2015: 253)

In these verses by Pizarnik, the excess of the logical produces an awareness of the limits of language. Language expresses that which lies beyond it: the silent foundations of the world, which we can apprehend artistically, by "singing". The fact that these voices are outside the representationalist domain of language relates to Miranda Fricker's (2007) feminist critique of hermeneutic injustice. This notion refers to the impossibility of having the interpretative resources necessary to acquire privileges considered normal, which allow us, for example, to name the injustices we suffer. As feminine

expression is beyond this logical sphere that founds the scientific sphere, it has been susceptible to exclusion. This exclusion takes on a profound significance when it results in the lack of resources necessary to denounce the injustices we suffer. This domain that exceeds the logical is in reality the domain of a fundamental and subjectively lived experience. What needs to be done is to reclaim the legitimacy of first-person experience. Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty claim this legitimacy in terms of the notion of life. Let us look at this more closely in the second part of this paper.

2.   *Feminine expression as a phenomenology of life*

As we know, Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, criticises his own perspective developed in the *Tractactus*. But we are not hermeneutically fair to Wittgenstein if we do not pay attention to the path that his thought follows between the *Tractactus* and the *Investigations*. We can understand the end of the *Tractactus* as a great questioning of how that realm which cannot be spoken of, which exceeds the logical-scientific realm. In the *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein gives us a first answer on how to express this sphere of excess: we can speak of it as we speak of the miraculous (LE: 17). Experience thus prevails over the logical. The subjective character of this experience is emphasised in his *Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough"*. In this text, he states that it is impossible to understand the experience of religious ritual from an external point of view (RF: 44-48). It is necessary to engage in ritual from personal experience in order to be able to express it. Thus, already in the *Investigations*, the starting point of his reflection on language is no longer the logical structure, but what we have characterised as what exceeds this structure. Wittgenstein then reverses the perspective of the *Tractactus*. Now, it is this subjective experience, like the experience of the miracle, that cuts across the nature of language. In reality, this experience is at the level of the living: "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (PI: § 19).

Wittgenstein invites us to understand language as we understand a living organism. Grammar, i.e. the organisation of this language, depends more on its use by living communities engaged in language games than on a static structure. To express does not mean to place

oneself within a representational structure. To express means to see new aspects, to enrich our experience of the world. As we know, in this dynamic view of language, there is no place for private language. A first difficulty arises in the feminist perspective we seek to develop with regard to expression. Indeed, the literary examples we have shown of women's voices that go beyond the realm of language, express subjective experiences, create new forms of expression. Braaten has already pointed out this problem with regard to a possible dialogue between Wittgenstein and feminism:

> The feminist practice of naming our own experience might well be regarded as an emergent language game. However, it is one that appears, on the face of it, to presume the existence of idiosyncratic, prelinguistic, previously inexpressible content, and thus to rub against the grain of the private language argument. Naming our experience can be likened to what in philosophical psychology would be called content *self*-ascription – attributing a thought, belief, or desire, among other things, to one-self. But Wittgenstein insists that there is no fact about the individual alone regarding what one privately thinks or feels. If by "naming our own experience" we mean that we find words, for the first time, to name previously unspoken experiences – experiences previously not on the consensual psychic map – then surely Wittgenstein's views run afoul of this practice. (Braaten 2002: 187-188)

We believe, however, that the impossibility of naming our own experience to which Wittgenstein refers, as if we were solipsistically creating new expressions, does not contradict the subjective and creative expression of the feminine in literature. On the contrary, it allows us to ask the question of the institution of this expression. This question is formulated by Merleau-Ponty's "Le problème de la parole". In this text, Merleau-Ponty transcends the Saussurian structuralist perspective of language with a reflection on the creative word. Merleau-Ponty will reflect on the creative word in relation to painting and music, taking as an example and inspiration Proust's pictorial and musical descriptions in *In Search of Lost Time.*

According to Merleau-Ponty, the coexistence of the diverse within the subjective life makes painting make us see another world in this prosaic and separate world: "the synthesis of things is done without concept" (2020: 154). Painting is the re-creation of the world. We show, we engender the real by the appearance

experienced by making it appear what it is not, "once identified, by using metaphors that are not participation in a prior idea but in a total existence" (ibid.: 160). This work gives the essence by gathering towards it the vectors of the painting. Language must then be considered as making its unity (its meaning) through the internal play of its metamorphoses ("and one suspends it from pre-established meanings", ibid.: 154). Meaning penetrates language just as the assemblage of colours surpasses itself towards the painting. If things call for art it is because they are already allusive, lateral presentation, "which shows by stealing" (ibid.: 154). The expression consists in liberating the presentation from the total being of the thing, bound by secret equivalences to all the others.

For its part, the musical phrase is expressive of feelings, such as love and sadness. There is a difference in the transmission of these feelings between artists and those who are not. Precisely because Swann is not an artist, he embodies art too much in the things of life. Musical expression shows the nature of expression itself: that it is never a copy. Music unfolds the very essence of feelings, because it communicates that essence to those who would not recognise it in life. Musical expression is thus made up of ideas, "it opens up a universe that is beyond the psychological, in the night of the soul" (ibid.: 157). There is a difference between this type of idea and ideas of intelligence: one is capable of grasping only the outline, which is why the music would seem to be silent and eloquent downstream. An inner necessity is that the value and meaning of the instruments is not created by the artist, but observed by him. But Proust goes further. The idea is of the soul, and in this unity the idea is carried by the soul until its death (in contrast to the Platonic idea that carries the soul away into eternity). The prodigy of music consists in the activity that makes the absolute individual communicate with each other and the soul become an idea. In other words, it is a question of finding intersubjectivity at the very centre of subjectivity, of making the night of the soul become a universe that can be shared by others. Music unfolds the musician's homeland, it attests that subjectivity is a universe, "art is this realised language" (ibid.: 157). This is possible in music because the relationships of sounds to sounds evoke a key (principle of systematic differentiation). This

principle is our way of expressing certain equivalences, which are based on memory (as in the image of the madeleine). Music is an idea or ideas, because it is a communication of hold on the universe, on being: "this hold in itself is life, the singular, this hold translated into relationships of sounds, times and songs, giving itself this imaginary body, is an idea" (ibid.: 158). Music is thus the constitution of a diacritical system that has the same structure of the world (ibid.: 161). It is aimed at the world and things by substituting their essence. There is, within music, a contact in the distance.

Music is therefore not thought. Music is an invitation to recognise life carrying the idea, getting the idea, in short, language. Language and music call for the real life of expression. The ideas of music would be the fulfilment of what is demanded by the transcendence of things. It is about the most individual in us being inherent to the universal. Music could have been language, which obliges us to examine language as if it were music. Music is only the expressive power without concepts, it is prior to concepts and for this reason it is the origin of language. This brings us to the idea of *Abbild*'s expression of an objective reality in relation to instituted language (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2020: 159) which has become second nature (cf. ibid.: 160). Music and painting make us realise that there is a universal upstream to the concept and that there is an afterlife, which is what literature is all about. If it is fundamental speech, it is phenomenology.

Moreover, the originality of the creative word, thought from the example of the writer, allows us to establish a problem: the tension between intellectual possession or acquisition and the impossibility of possessing an idea. Indeed, we can have an order of meanings and logical essences. The problem of the institution of language arises here. There would be a relationship between the instituted word and the creative word. The latter "gives itself its (private) institutions through which it goes further" (ibid.: 201). The word acquires its strength by degrees. The study of this development can teach us something about the collective institution. The crystallisation of the creative word is carried out on the basis of the instituted language. The writer takes as a support the word of other writers, his word is grafted onto the pre-personal language made up of other personal

words. It is the same with painting. The creative word opens a field, invites to speak, sets the possibility of words on the horizon. We then have a collective diacritical system and a personal diacritical system.

It will then be necessary to study how the word becomes an institution and how the institution is called upon to speak as a general word, as the very virtue of expression (ibid.: 202). Such a study will have to be based on an analysis of language and relate to the problem of the relationship between consciousness and history. The programme that Merleau-Ponty presents to us in order to carry out this new research is as follows:

– To look at the power of the writer to modify the collective institution in order to build in it his private institution, populated by the categories present in critical consciousness.

– To explore in what sense a literature is already contained in a language, as it constitutes a way of thinking or, at least, an *Erscheinungsform* of the world. Language from the point of view of familiarity with ordinary language does not imprison: "everything is possible in every language" (ibid.: 203). And this is possible thanks to the writer's living use of his language.

– In fact, it is through contact with the words of other writers that a writer's words germinate. In this sense, we can speak of an unconsciousness of the writer's work as language work which provokes decentration, restructuring, alteration of the personal use that the writer makes of the language in a conscious state.

– The field of speech becomes for the writer an idea to be understood in the Marxian sense of history as a relationship, objectified, between people. Literature and history would only be relationships between thoughts that critical consciousness can make explicit, at the risk of losing sight of the fruitfulness of these thoughts in the philosopher's mind.

Phenomenology thus allows us to link creative and deeply subjective expression with life in a universal sense, through the play of the language of the institution, which implies a historical and social background in the creative process. In women's literature, we see just such a link. Take, for example, this poem by Blanca Varela:

CONVERSATION WITH SIMONE WEIL

[...]
Must the angel renounce his feathers, the iris,
gravity and grace?
Did our hope of being better just end?
[...]
Half the children go to bed hungry.
—children, the ocean, country life, Bach.
—man is a strange animal.
The wise, in whom we placed our trust
betray us.
—children go to bed hungry.
—the elderly go to death hungry.
The word does not nourish. Numbers do not satiate.

(Varela 2018: para. 7)

It is a poem that makes us look critically and emotionally at social complexities. Moreover, Varela enters into dialogue with Weil's philosophy. He embodies it, realises it and institutes a new expression which is still her own subjective expression. This set of verses actually expresses his particular experience, but at the same time possesses a universal legitimacy. Let us look at this other poem:

HUNTING DAY

Gea unfolded
she has the face of the hunters that penetrated the meadow
those who imperturbably embraced the nails' warmth
(and hid their tracks with a desire for scars)
those who opened with their hands the precious matter
for public display and to await reverence
the suture is a bad dream
  put your ear against my chest and listen
        the other Gea advances at the peak of the afternoon
                        she's a leap in the center of the cornea

(Barja 2017: 27)

This poem also gives us a critical perspective on today's world by establishing itself among the radically subjective experience that reveals an ontological truth. The particular and the universal are given at once, at the same time, in the same conjunction of fright. The world, Gea, is felt as the body is felt, and its executioners

penetrate both dimensions at once. The suture is a bad dream, for it expresses what has been broken, divided by the hunters. And it is perhaps the division or separation of subjective expression from the existing whole that is lost when the female voice is silenced. The relevance of the question of the institution of feminine expression also allows us to see the subversive implications of this in the social imaginary. In these two poems we see legitimate critical perspectives which, by conveying lived experiences, can constitute successful awareness-raising.

In this paper, we have attempted, albeit in a very preliminary way, to lay the foundations for future research on women's literature that will enable us to articulate a feminist theory of expression. Our theoretical bases have been Wittgenstein's and Merleau-Ponty's perspectives on language. In both authors we find a theory of expression that goes beyond the structural boundaries of what we call today the logical or the scientific. This theory of expression allows us to enmesh first-person lived experience with life, understood in the most organic and broadest possible sense. Our goal is to show the systemic and socio-constitutive implications of women's literature. Basically, we believe that this literature contains great potentialities because it is located in that sphere, which the first Wittgenstein qualifies as mystical and which Merleau-Ponty qualifies as phenomenological, pre-nominative of language. That is to say, it is a kind of institutional literature that creates new expressions to name what remains in the silent and very particular sphere of experience enclosed in life. Is this not the same vision with which witches and wizards tried to understand the language of the living for curative purposes? We end this paper with the last lines of Emily Dickinson's poem that served us as an epigraph:

> That portion of the Vision
> The Word applied to fill
> Not unto nomination
> The Cherubim reveal—
>
> (Dickinson 1976, 505–506)

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