

Book Review on Pio Colonnello's *Synaesthesias and Anamorphosis Between Philosophy and Literature*. Mimesis: Milan, 2021, p. 150

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Pio Colonnello's book offers a speculative reading of the figures of synaesthesia and anamorphosis. It expands them beyond their, respectively, rhetorical and figurative context. The book brings together J. L. Borges, de Certeau, Montale, Jaspers, and Husserl, among others, in order to uncover a dimension of language, which goes beyond the objective representation of reality. This dimension of language embodies a performative gesture, which reshapes its "object" by referring it in an analogical—simultaneously synaesthetic and anamorphic way—to the weaving of other sensory spheres, fields, and images, so as to open up the ecstatic and corporeal dimension of the human experience.

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This volume explores a number of paths that cross philosophy, literature, and poetry. In particular, it brings together J. L. Borges, de Certeau, Montale, Jaspers, and Husserl, among others, in order to uncover the speculative potential of the figures of synaesthesia and anamorphosis. Whereas synesthesia, as a rhetorical and literary trope, refers to a particular kind of metaphor which establishes a mutual relationship between two words belonging to different sensory spheres, the figure of anamorphosis—in particular within the context of painting—points to a deformation of perspective. With anamorphosis, an image is projected in a distorted way into a new field, so as to be recognizable only from a particular vantage point. Escher's optical illusions, as "impossible objects", are specific examples of anamorphosis. In this book, Pio Colonnello, Full Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the University of Calabria (Italy), offers a speculative reading of the figures of synaesthesia and anamorphosis: He expands them beyond their, respectively, rhetorical and figurative context, so as to reveal a peculiar dimension of literary, poetic and philosophical language. This peculiar dimension of language does not identify an object by means of its representation. Thus, it does not grasp it in its "objectivity". Rather it reconfigures it through a prismatic lens, so as to transform its very ontological nature. This dimension of language embodies a performative gesture, which reshapes its "object" by referring it in an analogical—simultaneously synaesthetic and anamorphic way—to the weaving of other sensory spheres, fields, and images, so as to open up its transcendent and ecstatic dimension. Synaesthesia and anamorphosis are therefore, at the same time, the topic of the book, and the performative enactment of Colonnello's style of thinking, i.e., the literary and speculative form of this book.

In particular, in the first part of the book, entitled “Synaesthesia, Anamorphosis, Labyrinths”, the author explores the anamorphic relation between the metaphor of the labyrinth in J. L. Borges, a rhizomatic (Deleuze), ecstatic/uncanny (Heidegger, Freud), and erratic understanding of temporality, and the embodied movements of dance, as the latter was conceived of in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, in de Certeau’s reading of Catherine Pozzi’s mystical poetry, and in Borges’ understanding of musical tango.

In the second part of the book, by means of a number of phenomenological readings, particularly focusing on Husserl, Jaspers, Zubiri, and Ortega y Gasset, the author further investigates the anamorphic relation, i.e., the open and mutual referral between the concept of temporality and the constitution of subjectivity.

The book begins with a fascinating reading of Borges’ story *El jard ın de sonderosque se bifurcan* (cf. p. 17 f.). Through this reading, the author shows that Borges’ metaphor of the labyrinth offers an anamorphic image of both time and dance. On the one hand, Colonnello draws attention to the rhizomatic structure of Borges’ labyrinth. Hence, unlike the Classical or Cretan model, in which the maze can be crossed in a single direction so as to reach a center, and in contrast to a labyrinth in the shape of a “tree”, which involves infinite ramifications yet only one path leading to the exit, Borges’ labyrinth possesses a “rhizomatic structure” (cf. p. 20 f.). The latter is marked by an indefinite web of ramifications, in which each point can be connected to any other, so to give rise to an indefinite proliferation of connections (cf. p. 21). From this perspective, Colonnello claims that Borges’ labyrinth embodies an anamorphic image of time, since it offers a conception of time as a peculiar labyrinth, involving the “proliferation and ramification of all possible futures” (cf. p. 19 f.), as well as “the reversibility of the past” (cf. p. 22 f.). This (open) labyrinth contains all possible futures and past events, thereby breaking both the linearity and the irreversibility of time. Furthermore, together with a conception of the labyrinth as an anamorphic image of time, Colonnello draws attention to the constitutive anamorphic relation between the labyrinth and the movements of a dance. Indeed, the indication which the protagonist of Borges’ above-mentioned story receives to help him find his way to Stephen Albert—the only person able to solve the enigma in Borges’ story—embodies the spiral movement of “turning to the left at every crossroads” (cf. p. 18): i.e., “The indefinite and spiral movement of turning around in a dance step” (cf. p. 31). From this perspective, Colonnello shows that the labyrinth does not only embody the anamorphic image of time, but also offers an anamorphic image of dance, thereby revealing the close relation between time as a labyrinth and the tonality, musicality and movement of dance. Hence, the spiral movement of turning around again and again entailed in Borges’s story is also the key form of the labyrinth as the latter is conceived of in Antiquity. Thus, the relation between dance and the labyrinth is attested by Homer’s description of one of the scenes engraved by Ephesus on Achilles’ shield (cf. p. 32). The labyrinth is originally the path of a dance, since in Antiquity the latter takes the form of a “meander” in architecture and the figurative arts. This form points to the spiral pattern of a dance movement and “alludes to an open labyrinth” (p. 32). The same spiral pattern also marks Borges’ understanding of tango music (cf. p. 33 f.).

The book further investigates the uncanny and erratic dimension of our being in the world, so as to bring it in resonance with the anamorphosis of the labyrinth (Chapter 2). Through an analysis of Heidegger and Freud’s concept of “*Unheimlich*”, the author explores the constitutive not-being-at home in the world which marks the human condition. Furthermore, with reference to Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt, and contemporary philosophical works, the author analyzes our not-being-at-home as a political-existential condition (p. 47 f.). Here the constitutive “not-being-at-home” of humanity points to the task of developing “a politics of hospitality” (cf. p. 50 f.), whereby we are no longer rooted in the grounded soil of a city or state, since we rather learn to

dwell in the form of “*Wanderung*” (errancy), so as to become “resident foreigners” (cf. Di Cesare, 2017) in the world.

As an anamorphic image of dance and of time, the labyrinth is further examined, respectively, through the analysis of de Certeau’s reading of Catherine Pozzi’s mystical poetry (Chapter 3), and by means of an original interpretation of Montale’s poem “A Liuba che parte” (Chapter 4).

In “The Labyrinth of the Mystical Word” (Chapter 3), Colonnello shows that, according to de Certeau, Catherine Pozzi’s mystical poetry is strictly connected to the dimension of music, corporeality, dance, and rhythm. Indeed, Pozzi’s mystical poetry is compared by de Certeau to a “labyrinth” (p. 57), whereby “one can feel as though he/she is entering into a dance” (p. 56). Here the labyrinth, as an anamorphic image of dance, emerges again from a different perspective. Hence, the author underlines that the mystical dimension of language is marked by the constitutive impossibility of speaking of the mystical event, which the mystical word can only evoke, but invariably fails to express. The mystical event as such cannot be “said” but only experienced, since it does not properly “exist” like the things that “are” in the world. From this perspective, Colonnello stresses that the mystical event happens and gives itself (i.e., *Es gibt*), in the same way as Heidegger affirms that “time” and “being” cannot properly be said to “be”, since rather “*Es gibt*” (cf. p. 60). Accordingly, the author claims that the mystical dimension of Catherine Pozzi’s word offers itself within sensitive and corporeal experience, belonging as it does to the realm of music, corporeality, and dance: This word occurs in the form of an event, which can only be experienced and cannot be said, grasped, or foreseen (cf. pp. 60-61).

The author further explores the temporality of the event, its ecstatic and anamorphic status, through an original interpretation of Montale’s poem “A Liuba che parte” (Chapter 4). He underlines the inseparability between “necessity and miracle, transcendence and immanence” (cf. p. 67), which marks Montale’s poem. The latter describes the departure of Ljuba Flesch, a Jewish woman who leaves Italy in 1938, on the eve of the war. The light tone of the poem offers, as “an anamorphic image, its Janus-like face” (cf. p. 72): It shows the constitutive intertwining of the imminent tragedy of the war and the necessity of destiny, on the one hand, and the unpredictability of the miracle and the salvation (cf. p. 73 f.) on the other hand. This Janus-like, anamorphic face, points to an account of temporality in which past and future converge in the *unforeseeable* “chairological moment” (*kairos*): i.e., the very moment of sudden illumination and salvation which Montale’s poem evokes.

This chairological moment (*kairos*) and its relation to the corporeal dimension of “*pathos*” (sensitivity) are further explored by sketching out a “Christological poetry” (Chapter 5). Among other authors, Colonnello refers to Dostoevskij and his ecstatic rapture at the sight of Holbein’s famous “The Body of Dead Christ in the Tomb” painting. Here the beauty of a suffering and disfigured Christ entails both the “horror of Holy Friday and the resurrection of Easter” (p. 80). Horror and beauty, which are experienced before Christ’s suffering, are no longer in contradiction to each other; rather, within the horror of suffering, beauty opens up. This experience points to the chairological moment (*kairos*), which breaks the linearity of time and refers to Christ’s Second Coming (*parousia*). This is conceived of as the moment (*kairos*) of salvation, and it is also evoked in the famous passage of *The Idiot* according to which “beauty will save the world” (cf. p. 79). The Second Coming (*parousia*), therefore, does not spell out a chronological event, which will happen at the end of times. Rather, it points to an existential transfiguration of our actual way of living (cf. p. 81). Here one is no longer dominated by the sadness of suffering, but rather experiences—within the sadness of suffering—one’s life as hope, beauty, and giving (cf. p. 80 f.).

The second part of the volume is devoted to some phenomenological readings which explore the relation between temporality and the constitution of subjectivity from a philosophical point of view, so as to further deepen the sensitive dimension of this constitution. A peculiar aspect of the question of time in Husserl's 1906/1907 Lecture "Introduction to Logic and Theory of Knowledge" is investigated in order to shed light on Husserl's later reflection on the problem of time (Chapter 6). Some psychopathological problems concerning the constitution of subjectivity and personality in the young Jaspers are investigated, so as to uproot the sources of Jasper's philosophy (Chapter 7). A reinterpretation of the relationship between sensation and intellection in Xavier Zubiri, which deepens the sensitive dimension of experience (*pathos*), is further examined in Chapter 8. Finally, some original phenomenological paths, which are implicitly entailed by Ortega y Gasset's early works, are brought into light (Chapter 9).

Through these phenomenological readings, the author sheds light on the process of constitution of subjectivity, so as to investigate the temporal and sensitive dimensions of this process. Here a further anamorphic gesture is performed: In an analogical and anamorphic way, this gesture projects into a different field precisely the two dimensions which mark the poetic paths traced in the first part of book, namely the image of time and the sensitive dimension of dance, so as to envisage them from a phenomenological perspective.

The conclusion of the book is entrusted to a literary device: a letter written by the Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti to his beloved Jane Burden Morris, which the author's alter-ego finds by chance in flea market. Through this "unwritten letter", the final part of the book explores the intersection between poetry and painting, conceived of as analogical, synaesthetical, and anamorphic forms of language. In such a way, this literary text encapsulates the pivotal motifs of the book: the Janus-like/anamorphic face of beauty, its sensitive dimension and its transfigurative power. Above all, in the letter the figure of Matelda stands out. The latter is at the center of Rossetti's painting "Dante's Vision of Matilda Gathering Flowers" (1855). Matelda is the *beautiful woman* who appears before Dante "singing, *dancing*, and picking flowers", as he is entering into the Eden (cf. Dante, Canto XXVIII, Purgatorio), i.e., "a forest—dense, alive with green, divine". From Rossetti's perspective, Matelda is the anamorphic/mirror image of Proserpina, the goddess queen of the underworld, who Ovid describes in the first book of the *Metamorphoses*, just as Dante's Matelda, as a beautiful maiden (*puella*) gathering flowers in the forest. According to the myth, the rape of Proserpina is the event which transfigures the pain and fears of humanity, since through her journey into the underworld she turns into divine consciousness (cf. p. 129). This anamorphic image of Proserpina/Matelda, which transfigures the pain of humanity, anticipates the pivotal motifs in Dante's XXIX Canto, i.e., the passage from the Old to the New Testament. Hence, the metamorphosis into the new life of salvation in and within the old one again refers to the sensible and corporeal experience of Christ's beauty, which transfigures our own life.

Thus, through a gradual climax, the book explores the Janus-face of an anamorphic and synaesthetic dimension of language across painting, poetry, and philosophy. This dimension of language encompasses both sensitive/corporeal experience and poetry, both the light of Dante's words and the music of Rossetti's paintings, so as to express the temporal ecstatic moment (*kairos*), which *suddenly* breaks out and transfigures one's own life.