

THE INEFFABLE IN POETRY

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ABSTRACT: The essay discusses Charles Taylor's last book *Cosmic Connections* (2024), focusing on the issue of poetic epiphany or, more precisely, the characteristic of poetic language that Taylor calls "insight" and which can serve as a bridge between the subjective and objective facets of experience (the "interspace"). In particular, the essay considers the question of the poetic expression of the inexpressible, drawing on some verses by Arthur Rimbaud and using Ludwig Wittgenstein — the greatest absentee in *Cosmic Connections* — and his theory of meaning as a guide for progress.

Il saggio discute l'ultimo libro di Charles Taylor *Cosmic Connections* (2024) concentrandosi sulla questione dell'epifania poetica o, più precisamente, la caratteristica del linguaggio poetico che Taylor chiama "insight" e che può fungere da ponte tra dimensione soggettiva e oggettiva dell'esperienza (l'"interspazio"). In particolare, nel saggio viene presa in esame la questione della espressione poetica dell'inesprimibile prendendo spunto da alcuni versi di Arthur Rimbaud e usando la teoria del significato di Ludwig Wittgenstein — il grande assente in *Cosmic Connections* — come filo rosso per la discussione.

KEYWORDS: Poetry, Insight, Meaning, Inexpressible, Rimbaud, Ludwig Wittgenstein

PAROLE CHIAVE: Poesia, Intuizione, Significato, Inesprimibile, Rimbaud, Ludwig Wittgenstein

In this critical notice of Charles Taylor's *Cosmic Connections*, which I also intend as a personal tribute to his entire body of work, I wish to further elaborate on a central idea of it: the importance he attaches to the notion of revelation in poetic language, or of "epiphany" (Joyce's

term), or of what he also calls “insight into things” [...], with all the semantic richness that the word “insight” possesses in English: aspect, idea, way of seeing or of thinking, but also penetration or perspicacity⁽¹⁾. Like the German term *Stimmung*, “insight” has both a subjective meaning (the ability to see, to discern, sagacity) and an objective meaning (what is seen thanks to such discernment, the aspect of the thing that is revealed through it). It is a word which embodies one of the main ideas of Taylor’s book: to show that the poem creates a new kind of connection with the world or with nature, that it promotes what he calls an “interspace”. In French, I would say an *entre-deux* between the mind and the world, and thus a renewed experience of *connectedness*, of junction between the poet (or the reader) and his sensory environment.

The notion of “insight” allows us to get to the heart of poetry, which has the quality of “open[ing] a new avenue of insight” (Taylor 2024, p. 18) into the world.

I would like to gloss over this image of insight by adding what might seem like a footnote to Taylor’s impressive and incredibly rich book (which, therefore, would need none). The poetic use of language, he says, brings to light “a language of insight”. This is a slightly different image, but one that is consistent with the notion we might find in Heidegger, but also in Ricœur (1995) in his work on metaphor (and already in Aristotle, when he emphasizes that metaphor places something before the hearers’ eyes: *pro ommatôn*)⁽²⁾. *The Language Animal* (Taylor 2016, p. 109) already insisted on the “Cratyism” of language, which the mainstream philosophy of language fails to do justice to.

The question I would like to raise now is the following: With this dimension of “insight”, are we not touching on something like an inexpressibility that nonetheless can be expressed? This theme of the inexpressible is ubiquitous in Romantic poetics, less so in Taylor’s book. My footnote to his work will be devoted to it.

In Western thought, the ineffable has often been approached as an external limit to speech: what speech *cannot* say, a radical exteriority to the domain of the sayable. An illustration could be easily found in the

(1) This text was originally written for a symposium on Charles Taylor held at McGill University on the occasion of his 93rd birthday (November 2024). The page numbers in brackets refer to Taylor 2024.

(2) Aristotle (1984, p. 190, III, 1411 a 25): “making your hearers see things”.

Neoplatonic tradition or the apophatic theology of pseudo-Dionysius. Certainly, in this tradition, the ineffable (which is also unthinkable) can at least be said *indirectly* through a series of negations: God is not wise, but beyond wisdom, and so forth. The fact remains, however, that the ineffable is essentially outside discourse as such and can only be approached through the negation of attributes in their usual usage. In a way, this is also what is suggested by the main text in contemporary philosophy that deals with the question of the ineffable. By this I mean, of course, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, with its famous final proposition, numbered 7 (one of the most symbolically charged numbers in the Bible): "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (Wittgenstein 1922, p. 189). The image, here, is that of a delimitation between what can be said and what cannot be said, and therefore of an exclusion: the unspeakable *cannot be said*, and there is no point in claiming to say it. As Wittgenstein famously maintained, it can only be shown, or rather, it is shown in the logical form of propositions.

Could not this first conception of the ineffable be contrasted with a second one? Should we not think of the inexpressible not as *something exceeding* language but as something internal to it? Not what cannot be said, but what cannot be said *otherwise than it is said*, and therefore what cannot be paraphrased. If this is a viable understanding of the inexpressible, is not such an inexpressible at work everywhere in poetry? Is it not inseparable, one might say, from the poeticality of the poem? Is not poetry precisely a form of expression in which the words used cannot be replaced by others, *salva significatione*? The ineffable, then, is no longer what cannot be said at all — since, actually, it is said in the poem, the poem rests on such a "saying" — but rather what cannot be re-said outside the poem, that in which the saying and the said absolutely coincide, and which thus establishes an almost perfect adequacy between words and their meaning.

This is the basis of the Romantic theory of the symbol to which Charles Taylor attaches great importance. Unlike allegory, the symbol is an opaque sign that does not withdraw itself before what it signifies and, therefore, paradoxically points primarily toward itself and only *indirectly* to what it means. Thus, the meaning of an allegory is

transparent (for example, the meaning of the scales as an allegory of justice), whereas the meaning of the symbol is opaque and sets in motion an endless interpretation. Schelling defines the work of art as an expression of this inexhaustible meaning, and thus of the infinite in the finite: the work of art “presents an Infinite finitely displayed” (Schelling 1978, p. 225). Hence, the essence of art is symbolic, not allegorical. This is why the Romantics (the two Schlegel brothers, for example) placed so much emphasis on the impossibility of paraphrasing a poem as one of its distinctive characteristics. Poetry is not allegorical (transitive, functional, utilitarian, with no informational value of its own) but symbolic (intransitive, irreplaceable, informative, because fully intuitive). In poetry, the sign returns from its conventional status to its natural status, that is, to the status of a *motivated* sign, thus establishing a secret affinity with the thing. As August Schlegel wrote: “Poetry is nothing but a perpetual creation of symbols; we either seek for something spiritual an external mantle or we relate something external to an invisible inner reality” (quoted in Taylor 2024, p. 14). What is signified poetically, i.e., signified through a *symbol*, cannot be said in any other way. For a symbol cannot be dissociated from what it symbolizes. In this case, access to what it symbolizes is only possible through *this* symbol.

However, the philosophically difficult question (which I will not presume to answer here) is: What exactly prevents such paraphrasing in poetry? Here, several answers immediately come to mind.

The first and most obvious answer insists on the inseparability of what we usually call “content” and “form”, following Valéry’s definition of poetry in *Tel quel*: “Le poème, cette hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens” (Valéry 1943, p. 79). This is what Jakobson (1960) calls the “poetic function” of language, which consists of highlighting the materiality of language for its own sake.

However, I think that this first answer is insufficient. Is it true that you cannot replace one expression with another in a poem? Would it not be better to say that you cannot replace one expression with another *without being a poet yourself*, in other words, without having a “poetic sense”? Let us not forget that poets spend most of their time replacing one expression with another. It is not unusual for them to write several versions of the same poem. Often, all these versions have their

own poetic quality. Let us take as example the last stanza of Rimbaud's "Éternité", which describes an experience of eternity through the connectedness to nature, the main topic of *Cosmic Connections*. In the version cited in *Une saison en enfer*, the poem is introduced by the following passage: "Enfin, ô bonheur, ô raison, j'écartai du ciel l'azur, qui est du noir, et je vécus, étincelle d'or de la lumière *nature*" [At last, O happiness, O reason, I removed from the sky the blue that is black, and I lived, a glitter of gold in the light of *nature*]. The version of the stanza generally retained by publishers is the following:

Elle est retrouvée.
Quoi? L'éternité.
C'est la mer allée
Avec le soleil.

But in other autograph manuscripts and in *Une saison en enfer*, we find:

Elle est retrouvée!
– Quoi ? l'éternité.
C'est la mer mêlée
Au soleil.

A third version, which I personally find of great poetic beauty, reads as follows:

Elle est retrouvée.
Quoi? l'éternité.
C'est la mer allée
Avec les soleils⁽³⁾.

Can we say that one of these versions is more poetic than the others — or more prosaic? I don't think so. The one that mentions "suns" in the plural is perhaps the most surprising. How are we to understand this plural? Does it mean a plurality of stars, suggesting thereby the

(3) The three versions can be found in Rimbaud 1999, pp. 761-767.

infinity of nature? Or does it suggest the myriads of tiny suns shimmering over the sea, multiplied on its surface? Whatever the case, the argument that it is impossible to paraphrase a poem clashes with the multiple variants of a text.

Another answer seems more interesting. The impossibility of paraphrasing a poem stems from the fact that poetry uses language differently from everyday language, according to a different “logic”. In poetry, language is used as a means for experiencing aspects of meaning that cannot emerge in ordinary sentences. But how can we characterize this other “logic” or this other “use” of words?

In this respect, it would be interesting to turn to a philosopher who is, in a sense, the greatest absentee in *Cosmic Connections* (but very present in many other Taylor’s books): Ludwig Wittgenstein. Earlier, I said too hastily that he tended to relegate the ineffable outside language in the *Tractatus* and he thought of it as a limit of language, also corresponding to the limits of our world. Such a boundary silences the ineffable. But we know from his friend Paul Engelmann that Wittgenstein was fond of poetry (Goethe, Mörike, or Gottfried Keller, among others) and even that “he recited [Mörike’s passages] with a shudder of awe” (Engelmann 1967, p. 86). Wittgenstein once read a poem by Rabindranath Tagore to the astonished representatives of the Vienna Circle, who had invited him to talk about the *Tractatus*! And yet Wittgenstein, even though he has written very little on the subject, seems to have seen poetry as one of the places (along with metaphysics) where the *animal loquens* measures herself against the limits of language. For him, this confrontation with the ineffable is perhaps even the main characteristic of poetry and this is already the case in the *Tractatus*. A poem precisely seeks to express the inexpressible and thus to blur the limits of the sayable and the unsayable. It uses language to bring it to its limits. But, unlike philosophy, this renewed effort is not fruitless since it is, on the contrary, the source of the greatest achievements. This is what emerges from the only written commentary that Wittgenstein seems to have made on a poem, a poem by Ludwig Uhland, in a letter to Engelmann dated 9 April 1917: “The poem by Uhland is really magnificent. And this is how it this: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable, then *nothing* gets lost. But the

unutterable will be — unutterably — *contained* in what has been uttered” (Engelmann 1967, p. 7).

This astonishing formula can be commented on by saying that it marks the passage from a conception of the ineffable as a limit or as an “outside” of (meaningful) language to a positive conception of the ineffable as internal to language itself. According to this reading, the poem, strictly speaking, does not seek to *express* the inexpressible (which is impossible, according to the *Tractatus*), but rather, with all the paradoxicality of this formula, to express the inexpressible *inexpressibly* (or to express the inexpressible without making it expressible, i.e. by *manifesting* it). I mean, not to reduce it, but to bring it to the fore. We find here again Taylor’s “language of insight”.

Now, one might be tempted to say that what Wittgenstein condenses here into a single formula is discussed in greater detail at the very end of *Philosophical Investigations*, in a set of remarks grouped in section XI of its second part. Here, Wittgenstein shows that poetry proceeds from a relationship to words that is quite distinct from the one we have with ordinary language. And he goes on to stress the fact that, in poetry, words come to be experienced as having, in addition to their use (and therefore their meaning in the ordinary sense) something like a “soul” or an “aura” of meaning. This is what could forbid paraphrasing. In this context, he does not hesitate to speak of a fullness of meaning for the poem (and for a *poetic* reading of it) that brings into play another concept of meaning than our ordinary one: “When I pronounce this word while reading with expression it is completely filled with its meaning (*mit seiner Bedeutung angefüllt*). — ‘How can this be, if the meaning is the use of the word?’ Well, what I said was intended figuratively. Not that I chose the figure: it forced itself on me. — But the figurative employment of the word can’t get into conflict with the original one” (Wittgenstein 1963, 215e).

This is a difficult passage to comment on. What we have is an inner dialogue in which several voices are heard. On the one hand, this dialogue suggests that what is often retained from *Philosophical Investigations*, namely that for a large class of cases, the meaning of an expression is its use, is not enough to describe what meaning is. And yet, as one of the voices objects, couldn’t it be because, when I speak of

a poetic word as “filled with meaning”, I am using a mere metaphor? Yes and no, because this image forces itself on me. There really is no other way of putting it. In other words, we are not talking about a mere figure of speech, but about an aspect of meaning that cannot be captured by the equivalence: meaning = usage.

Wittgenstein’s subsequent remarks seem to confirm this reading. Indeed, he tries to fathom out what can be understood by the word “meaning” used in this new way — not with reference to the rules of usage of a word but to the fullness of meaning it possesses in its poetic use (but is this word still appropriate?). This fullness of meaning corresponds to a pictorial or figurative use of language, that is, an experience in which meaning is in some way present in the word itself as its “soul” or “physiognomy”. As Wittgenstein observes, “if a sentence can strike me as like a painting in words, and the very individual word in the sentence as like a picture, then it is no such marvel that a word uttered in isolation and without purpose can seem to carry a particular meaning in itself” (Wittgenstein 1963, 215e).

Are we dealing here with a different concept of meaning or with a concept that is merely an extension of the concept that is set forth in *Philosophical Investigations*? It does seem that we are dealing with another concept since the apparently tautological, but in fact deflationary, explanation of the meaning offered by Wittgenstein against all semantic Platonism does not apply to it: “For a *large* class of cases — though not for all — in which we employ the word ‘meaning’, it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (Wittgenstein 1963, p. 20e, § 43). We can better understand the restriction: “though not for all” if we admit that this use of “meaning” is different from its ordinary use. However, Wittgenstein abandons his previous thematization of this other use of language (which is precisely not a *use* in the instrumental sense of the word) in terms of ineffability. The reference to the ineffable is relinquished in favor of the idea of a particular *experience* of language. Poetic language provides us with an experience of the word and its aura of meaning, analogous to that provided by a painting, and thus “in connexion with this *game* of experiencing a word, we also speak of the ‘meaning’ and ‘meaning it’” (Wittgenstein 1963, 216e). One wonders whether Wittgenstein is not getting here very close to the

Romantic theories of poetry as symbol that Taylor discusses in *Cosmic Connections*.

Hence Wittgenstein's distinction — albeit a very underdeveloped one — between what he refers to as a “primary sense” and a “secondary sense” that words can possess, the latter corresponding to the fullness of meaning achieved in poetry: “Here one might speak of a ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sense of a word” (Wittgenstein 1963, 216e). As Wittgenstein (1963, 216e) immediately points out, this secondary sense should not be understood as a metaphorical or figurative sense, because what is at stake here is not resorting to tropes but a particular use of language as a whole, a properly *poetic use*. This is not so much a figurative use as a *figural* (or pictorial) one — where words resemble a painting because they acquire a kind of intrinsic evocative power: “The secondary sense is not a ‘metaphorical’ sense. If I say: ‘For me, the vowel *e* is yellow’, I do not mean: ‘yellow’ in a metaphorical sense, — for I could not express what I want to say in any other way than by means of the idea ‘yellow’”. Wittgenstein's example reminds us of another of Rimbaud's poems, “*Voyelles*”.

Can we understand these passages as an appendix to the letter to Engelmann? If we follow this line of thought, it seems that the inexpressible, which has disappeared, is replaced by the figurative or pictorial sense that the pure experience of language gives us, and which defies any paraphrase, just as a painting is unique and cannot be replaced by another.

Many metaphors that can be described as *poetic* are of this type. When Rimbaud, in *Alchimie du verbe*, writes the sentence “Je devins un Opéra fabuleux” [I became a fabulous Opera], he uses an expression that *can* certainly be paraphrased but whose quasi-pictorial character lies elsewhere: in the absolute economy of means that poetic expression achieves. Of course, we can always comment on it by saying that, in the *illuminations* from which the poet is seized, his interiority is enriched by visions offered to several senses, to the point of mimicking the interior of an opera: both a stage with characters, painted scenery, etc., and an orchestra playing divine music. Yet all this is suggested by a single word, or rather an extraordinarily condensed expression that shocks the reader by its incongruous, even absurd character: “to become an opera”.

But beyond any particular figure of speech, it is language itself that means differently here, and this is precisely what the image of language as painting suggests. Let us return briefly to the multiple “suns” in the last version of the poem “Eternity”. There is no metaphor here either. And yet a proper noun is used in the plural to designate — what? the multiplication of this star by the waves? The vertigo that seizes the poet and gives him a sense of eternity, putting him in the presence of an infinity of suns? Or perhaps the “cosmic connection” achieved by the poem with the infinity of the stellar universe?

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