

REVIEWS

Oxymoron

Paolo Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature*, trans. Giuseppina Mecchia, Semiotext(e), South Pasadena CA, 2015. 264 pp., £12.95 pb., 978 1 58435 094 1.

In Paolo Virno's previous book, *A Grammar of Multitude*, grammar – in other words, the philosophy of language – played second fiddle to the multitude – in other words, to the political analysis of the contemporary, post-Fordist state of capitalism (the book ends on ten theses on post-Fordism), inspired by Marx's seminal page on 'general intellect' in his *Grundrisse*. Language was deemed to have become a direct productive force, the post-Fordist labour force being an intellectual force, in which linguistic competence was of the essence.

In this book, the philosophy of language has come to the forefront. The multitude is evoked only in the last essay, and all the previous essays, which, we are warned, must be read in order, work their way towards a coherent account of the language faculty and of historical languages: from the speaker as musical virtuoso (a theme already dealt with in *A Grammar of the Multitude*), to the 'absolute performative', linguistic anthropogenesis, second-degree sensualism, natural philosophy and a defence of reification. The tone is given in the very first sentence of the introduction: 'This book contains several philosophical reflections on language, that is, on human nature.' There is an obvious element of provocation in this. 'Human nature' is a danger word, and even if we grant it a modicum of relevance, that it should be equated with language is highly contentious. But in philosophy provocation may well be an asset and it is the element in which Virno dwells. Witness his taste for the oxymoron. So welcome to the Wonderland of continental philosophy of language, where the local Mad Hatter will produce, with considerable skill and a certain amount of glee, sundry white rabbits, like the absolute performative and second-degree sensations (such as the colour of words) – and we enjoy the journey every bit as much as Alice did.

'Continental' this philosophy certainly is: no analytic philosophy of mind, no universal grammar and no cognitive linguistics (cognitivism is the explicit philosophical opponent). Instead, we have Kantian transcendentalism, the process of individuation

described by Gilbert Simondon and the enunciation linguistics of Émile Benveniste. (The last is unjustly neglected and under-translated in English-speaking countries and Virno's book would be precious if only as an introduction to his approach to linguistics.) But Virno's philosophy is 'continental' not only in its references, but also in its rhetorical stance: the systematic development of various instances of oxymoron. The usual dichotomies (nature versus culture, transcendental versus empirical) are not taken as simple opposites, the two aspects of a paradox; nor are they captured in the unity of a dialectic process. They are joined in what Deleuze calls a disjunctive synthesis, the philosophical equivalent of the rhetorical figure of the oxymoron. Thus the phrase 'natural history' is not taken by Virno in its antiquated sense, as an old name for the sciences that deal with the natural world, but as an oxymoron, where the natural cannot, and yet must, be historical. The task of the philosopher is to historicize nature and to naturalize history. The truth is not out there, it is in between, the relationship between the two terms of the oxymoron being what Simondon calls a transductive relation, a relation that creates its terms (as opposed to inductive or deductive relations, where one term precedes the relation and the other follows). A Marxist example of such a relation would be the relation between opposing classes, which are created by the class struggle. In Virno's philosophy of language, it is language that is the site, or the manifestation, of such oxymorons.

Let us take, for instance, the opposition between the transcendental and the empirical. The usual position on this dichotomy is that the transcendental, being the precondition of our experience of the empirical, is not itself an object of experience. In the field of language, the opposition takes the form of the opposition between the transcendental linguistic faculty and empirical utterances. Virno's aim is to link together the two terms of this potential oxymoron, by producing utterances that make the linguistic transcendental manifest, an object of

sensory experience. He finds this in the ‘absolute performative’ of the utterance ‘I speak’, where the usual content of the utterance ‘what-we-say’ (*Ciò che si dice*) is overshadowed by the pure sayability of ‘the-fact-of-speaking’ (*Il fatto che si parla*). Here, Virno is implicitly playing with another dichotomy, one that the English language does not allow, but on which a good part of French linguistics, after Benveniste, is founded: between *énoncé* (the utterance as result, what we say) and *énonciation* (the utterance as process, the fact of speaking). The utterance ‘I speak’ is an *énoncé* the only contents of which are its own *énonciation*. It is a performative, in that it does what it says, and it is absolute, in that it can never fail – it is the only performative for which it is impossible to imagine conditions of infelicity.

Except, of course, it does not exist. It is a purely theoretical utterance, which the grammar of the language allows, but with no possible meaning outside the philosophical language game in which it plays the main part. But, faithful to his oxymoric stance, Virno insists that it must be voiced, that the word must become flesh by being articulated, that the theoretical potentiality must become actuality. And, in support of this, he produces various language games, the logical structure of which is provided by the absolute performative. Not all of them are convincing. Thus he claims that in phatic utterances, as in our everyday small talk, we speak not in order to communicate or to share a cognitive content, but in order to practise the simple ritual of speaking. What-we-say is communicative and cognitive; the-fact-of-speaking is ritualistic. Unfortunately, in both cases the proposition is patently false: we may not say ‘hello!’ or talk about the weather in order to share a cognitive content, but we do utter these utterances in order to communicate, to establish or to maintain communication.

But Virno’s other examples are far more convincing. He borrows from Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky the concept of a child’s egocentric discourse, when a child speaks in order to establish her capacity to speak, to exercise her linguistic faculty. Virno also proposes an analysis of religious language, from simple prayer to glossolalia. Contrary to the trivial analysis of common sense, we do not pray to God in order to inform Him of a state of affairs (since He knows it all already) or to demand something of him (since He is far above attempts at influencing His will), but in order to ritually assert our faith. In this sense, the endless repetition of the Om syllable by Buddhists is the archetypal form of prayer. This

account also applies to glossolalia, where, under the direct inspiration of God, the faithful utter a stream of words whose only meaning resides in the bare fact of their utterance. Thus the linguistic transcendental, the faculty of speaking, the precondition of actual utterances, finds its incarnation in specific language games, when it become empirical without ceasing to be transcendental.



The phrase ‘linguistic faculty’ is fraught with danger. It smacks of Chomskyan innatism and universal grammar. But it is not used in that sense by Virno, who revisits the famous discussion between Chomsky and Foucault at Eindhoven in 1971, the topic of which was the concept of human nature. Chomsky’s naturalist position (the language faculty is inscribed in the mind/brain in the form of an innate universal grammar) clashed with Foucault’s historicist position, framed in impeccable Marxist terms (language is a set of historical and social phenomena). Virno shifts the ground of the debate by producing one more oxymoron: the way to approach the question of language adequately is through what he calls ‘natural historiography’. Utterances are the product, necessarily and inseparably, of biology and of history. Their temporality belongs both to the arrested time of evolution (which he calls ‘meta-history’) and to the time of historical change. For, on the one hand, an utterance is the product of the linguistic faculty, understood here as the biological

precondition of language (the physiological structure needed for phonic production) and, at the same time, the product of a historical conjuncture in which this language is actually spoken (with its social, cultural and historical determinants). Language, therefore, is a 'transitional object' in the sense of Donald Winnicott. Language links the potentiality, the *dunamis* of the linguistic faculty, with actually existing and constantly changing historical language.

At this stage, we have a full-fledged philosophy of language, at the centre of which we find the following four propositions: (i) there is an incommensurable difference between the linguistic faculty and the historical languages; (ii) the linguistic faculty coincides with the ancient notion of *dunamis* or potentiality; (iii) the linguistic faculty coincides with the historical languages and characterizes the entire experience of the speaker; (iv) 'the linguistic faculty confirms the instinctual poverty of the human animal, its undefined character and the constant disorientation that defines it'. In the contrast between propositions (i) and (iii), we recognize a formulation of the oxymoron that characterizes language, an oxymoron that incarnates itself in proposition (ii); whereas proposition (iv) introduces a new element, the unfinished state of the human animal at birth, known as neoteny – which Marxist psychologists like Vygotsky make much use of.

In order to assess the interest and importance of Virno's philosophy of language, it might be useful to read it in conjunction with Lucien Sève's massive volume on Marxian anthropology, *L'Homme?* (published in 2008, an important book in urgent need of translation). We find a number of points of convergence. First, they share a critique of interiority (the title of one of the sections of Virno's book). Language for Virno has pre-individual elements (the linguistic faculty) and it is transindividual, a concept he borrows from Simondon. In Sève, whose anthropology is a sustained commentary on Marx's sixth thesis on Feuerbach ('the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations.') the central thesis is what he calls the social ex-centration of human essence. The unfinished human animal becomes fully human by appropriating the human world inscribed in society (in historical language, in knowledge, beliefs and skills).

Second, Virno's concept of reification (there is a whole chapter devoted to a spirited defence of reification, which he distinguishes from both alienation and

fetishism) corresponds not to its classic conception in Lukács (whom Virno does not even mention), but to the Marxian concept of objectivation (*Vergegenständlichung*), one of the five concepts on which Sève constructs his anthropology: the human species became human by objectifying, in tools and signs, the result of its activity, thus creating a human world, transmissible to the next generation and accumulating knowledge. This is why it left the arrested time of biological evolution to enter the accelerated time of history; why, in Virno's terms, metahistory coincides with history. Third, Sève, a consistent Marxist, would have no difficulty in accepting Virno's main oxymoron, 'natural history', as it is a venerable Marxian proposition that *Homo sapiens* is a creature both natural and social-historical. And, as we saw, in spite of his use of the term 'innate' to qualify the linguistic faculty, Virno's innatism owes nothing to Chomsky, restricted as it is to the physiological preconditions of speech.

There are also, however, notable differences between the two approaches. Thus Sève would certainly reject the very first proposition of Virno's book, where he equates human nature with language. For Sève the sign is one of the means of production (the other being the tool) whereby human activity constructs the human world of objectivation. Virno's *tout au langage*, a common feature of our philosophical modernity, would smack of idealism for Sève: his anthropology is emphatically *not* a philosophy of language. And he would have problems with Virno's continued anthropogenesis. Virno makes much of Benveniste's suggestion that the speaker, with each new enunciation, appropriates the whole of language: the ontogenesis of the speech act recapitulates the phylogenesis of language. For Sève, the appropriation of the social human world, whereby the human animal becomes truly human, is a slow and cumulative process of learning, and this concerns language as all other types of knowledge.

It would seem that the old operaist and political leftist has not quite forgotten the philosophical convictions of his youth, even if they have now taken a widely different form. The Marxian oxymoron, the 'social individual', still figures in the book. But the philosophical *provocateur* has certainly achieved his goal: to compel the reader into thinking anew. And we remember Deleuze's contention that real thought is always the result of a *coup de force*. We must accept this coup, and read Virno.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle