

Review of Peter Carravetta, *The Elusive Hermes: Method, Discourse, Interpreting*. Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group Publishers, 2012.
486 pages

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Preview

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The first volume here plays a double role: it presents itself firstly as the theoretical ground on which will rest the interpretation of the postmodern culture that will be articulated in the following volumes; it also plays the role of a prism through which the main ambition of the author is dispersed and decomposed in an ensemble of smaller, programmatic ambitions.

One. The author wants to fill a void that exists according to him in the philosophical literature on hermeneutics: philosophers and hermeneutists in particular have not been sensitive enough to the methodological dimension of all interpretative acts (5). Even Gadamer, in his opus *Truth and Method*, beyond a few remarks on our modern conception of method and the deep affinities that it shares with the natural sciences (3), offers no indication as to what would be a proper methodology for interpretation. Hence, for the author, "hermeneutics...ought to rethink the problem of method and its relevance to all aspects of comprehension and the determination of knowledge, scientific or not" (3).

Two. Considering the links that tie the modern concept of method to the practice of the natural sciences, and even for the more or less successful attempts to import this concept into the fields of the humanities, the author

believes that this concept is insufficient because it evacuates any reference to the “rhetorical aspect of any statement that can be called scientific or philosophical” (4). On the contrary, a hermeneutics that would be honest and transparent cannot ignore this aspect. It cannot “render (its) language transparent, innocuous, uninfluential during the quest, *as if it weren't there*” (4). It hence becomes important to articulate the lineaments of a method that is fully conscious of its rhetorical dimension.

Three. Our capacity to articulate a new concept of method is not an easy thing and contemporary thought must abandon a good number of conceptual determinations that are central to the modern concept of method. To do so, the author sees it fit to tell the history of this modern concept of method (a history that would be that of a progressive fetishization of an anti-rhetorical method), so as to unmask the contingency and the limits of that concept: *contingency*, because this historical review aims to situate the sources of our modern concept of method in historical moments of philosophical decisions; *limits*, because this concept cannot be simply applied to the practice of hermeneutics. This history will be punctuated by a series of familiar names: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Ramus, Bacon and Galileo, and Descartes. This history also becomes, for the author, a therapeutic gesture in the sense that the unmasking of the “ideological” contingency (8) of our modern concept of method will enable the mind of the reader to accept a concept of method for which rhetoric plays an essential and constitutive role.

This history of the concept of method will also enable the reader to see what one could call a *counter-history* which points to different sources of philosophical inspiration for a method conscious of its own rhetoricity: the sophists, Hegel and Husserl, Peirce and Buchler, but mostly, the phenomenological developments of Perelman, Gadamer and Ricœur.

Four. This first volume finally tries to articulate the general lines of an exit plan out of a methodological crisis that hits the different regions of human knowledge, a crisis of which one symptom is the opposition between the natural sciences and the humanities (8), an opposition that is, according to the author, the caricature expression of a divorce between method and rhetoric (8). It would hence be necessary, to get out of this crisis, to articulate a concept of method able to reunite the different sciences in the light of one quest methodologically articulated for knowledge. In short, if it is true, as the author says, that any theory must be the reflection of a method and vice versa (6) the theory that the author proposes in the first part of the book must find its methodological twin; and the historical part of this first volume seeks to prepare contemporary thought for a method that is conscious of its own rhetorical reality.

In the following paragraphs, (a) I will quickly expose the theory of

interpretation that is presented in the first part of the book; (b) I will then turn my attention to the historical part of the book; (c) I will finally close this short reportage with my general appreciation of the book and with two remarks.

Theory of Interpretation

The theory of interpretation or rather, the “hermeneutical model” (39), as the author calls it is of a disarming simplicity. The author, however, sees the necessity to articulate his model through a series of geometrically inspired representations: a model that is now triangular, then circular (29-39). The author will need 7 figures to communicate the following: when one speaks of interpretation, one must speak of (i) a work in need of an interpretation, (ii) an interpreter, socially located, that (iii) commits an act of interpretation; these three “nodes” are co-enabling (33-34) and form an hermeneutical circle, a circle that is itself temporally fluid and that is available to the “possibility of myth, the unconscious, memory, and the fact that any recalling ... will proceed forward in a number of possible circuits and circumstances” (38).

The most important point, however, is the fact that the author identifies this act of interpretation as a rhetorical or discursive act (37), and that the act’s language is itself subjected to a series of historical and material determinations. Hence, an act of interpretation that wants to be self-transparent must recognize the historicity and materiality of the language that it uses, and cannot take this language for granted something that the modern concept of method would have done by distancing itself from the sole idea of rhetoricity.

If this theoretical model disarms by its simplicity, and if any theory has a methodological twin *made in its image*, it is difficult for the reader not to infer, from this theoretical simplicity, a methodological poverty. Indeed, although this model suggests that the act of interpretation is spatiotemporally located (which is certainly an important truth), and if the author does also puts the emphasis on the conscious dimension of the interpreter “*il y a la conscience!*,” says the author (6) the model does not suggest (or does not seem to do so) any indication regarding the posture or attitude of this consciousness, or regarding what would enable us to segregate a *consciousness-towards-method* from a consciousness that is not oriented methodologically. In fact, although the given indications do direct the reader, generally speaking, towards the phenomenological developments of Ricoeur and Gadamer, and although these are interesting avenues of research, the author does not offer any work of synthesis, of recuperation and

incorporation of these developments to the theoretical model. Hence, these suggestions are merely *that*, suggestions, and do not enable the reader to form a clear idea regarding the morphology of the hermeneutical method that the author seeks to develop and deploy throughout his tetralogy. Or maybe the fact of denying the reader a clear methodological morphology is precisely (and strangely) what the author seeks to do: “Cast in the vibrato of the play between light and shadow, at once dawn and crepuscule, Hermes returns as the changeable, tireless, unpredictable, multicolored mask” (364). “Hermes symbolizes the metamorphosis of the subject, and becomes the key *figura* to explore the meaning of the mask” (366). Hence, method has no face. It is not a face either, but rather *is* a mask, or a series of masks (or is method simply masked, hidden, mysterious and magical?). The author’s ambition, which I praised at the beginning of this reportage, here becomes unfortunate, because it seems to make him lose track of the theoretical and explanatory labor that is necessary for the concretization of this ambition.

We should however and I do so without any hesitation give the benefit of the doubt to the author, as he will most certainly develop these methodological indications and these conceptual determinations in the second volume of his tetralogy, *Mercury’s Threshold: Method and the Interpretation of Culture in Contemporary Italy*.

Method, Historically Speaking

The historical part of the book is probably the most engaging one, even for its density (more than 200 pages!) and its scope (2500 years!). Indeed, the archaeology of the modern concept of method that this part tries to articulate is an important moment of the project as a whole, in its therapeutic aim. But it would still be possible for the reader to appreciate this part of the book in and for itself, for the attention and the scrupulousness of the exegetical labor that it proposes.

The story begins after a short introduction on the mythological context of Greek thought and on the conditions of the birth of philosophy (71-97) not with Socrates or Plato, but with the Sophists; more specifically, it begins with Protagoras and his famous maxim “of all things the measure is man, of things that they are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not” (99). And the objective of the author is clear: “For nearly twenty-three centuries the Sophists have been associated, negatively, with the introduction of *rhetoric* as a special discipline.... We should read them *as* philosophers plain and simple” (102-103); we should read the Sophists not as enemies of philosophy, but rather as philosophical interlocutors through whom emerge the first traces of an hermeneutics that is properly human and

purified of any theological or magical considerations (99), a hermeneutics that is, so to say, carnal, not ideal.

Indeed, Protagoras would be the first to defend the idea according to which *logos* is not absolute and can only exist within a “frame of reference which accounts for the material conditions or existence of the speakers” (101). Hence, “we can see where *logos* must be studied as actual *logos*” (101). The contribution of the Sophists could hence be located in the fact that they *fragilize* and *humanize* *logos* by stripping it from its divine attributes which would explain the importance and attention that they give to the articulation of *convincing* arguments, hence to the rhetorical arts (109-110). This reading of the Sophists, resting on a reconstruction of Protagoras’ thesis and on a rejection of classical interpretation of this thesis (101-106), is a moment of great honesty and its exegetical and argumentative fluidity serves well the author’s case.

From that point on, as we know, history is not kind to the Sophists, as they will be rejected, from Plato and Aristotle to the modern era, from out of the field of philosophy proper: “precisely because they deal with the real world of facts, blood and commerce, (the sophists) are not to be trusted, being liars, prostitutes of the logos, avatars of make-believe” (141). Their humanistic intuitions will hence be covered up and muffled by the history of philosophy. Plato indeed distances himself from the Sophists through a double movement: contrary to the Sophists and their worry for what is carnal and terrestrial, Plato is rather obsessed by what is ideal and extraterrestrial, “the One, the Pure, the Eternal, the Innate Essence” (144). But from the moment that knowledge is knowledge of an Idea detached from daily life, the method that is appropriate to such an idea of knowledge cannot be anything else than this “method of division”, dialectics (113), which aims to separate the essence of the Idea from the experience that one might have of it (113); this is a method that cannot do otherwise than to consider the materiality of rhetoric (or its corporality) as being something that must be “subsumed as a preliminary, thought necessary evil to be overcome... basically legislated out of the scope of philosophy” (137). Rhetoric hence becomes the place of appearance an appearance from which philosophy must detach itself.

This “original dislocation” between method and rhetoric will be radicalized by Aristotle, even if he rejects the Platonic fetishization of the unnatural Idea. Indeed, even though he reinstalls the Platonic ideas on the plane of contingency and probability, Aristotle separates, nonetheless, rhetoric which deals with appearance, with the arrangement of discourse, and with the probable from the dialectical method, inherited from Plato, which deals with necessity and knowledge (153); and this dialectical method will be transformed, the author says, in a mechanical and regulated entity, the

sylogistic method, “a mechanical monster, the versatile yet preprogrammed sequencing of affirmations which will yield predictable results” (122), a method that is hence formalized and devoid of any content, as it can be used whether we talk about humans or rocks.

This association of rhetoric with *doxa* and the probable, its separation from any legitimate quest for knowledge (147), and the burial of the humanistic and philosophical intuitions of the Sophists will be maintained into the first convulsions of the modern age, that is to say, the conceptual revolutions of Bacon and Galileo and their rejection of a number of Aristotelian intuitions ossified by medieval scholasticism. Indeed, Bacon rejects the syllogistic method as it keeps him from dealing directly with nature in the sense that it (the method) turns the attention of the scientist towards regularities that are essentially linguistic or grammatical and that are not necessarily present in nature “it forces assent, not things” (190) and hence the need for an inductive and experimental method. “A method cannot be a foundation, but is what allows one to either create or discover a foundation” (189). Language hence remains necessary so as to articulate the laws of nature, but it must remain minimal and almost invisible in its instrumentality.

This idea of a minimal scientific language will then become one of Galileo’s main battles: rejecting rhetoric as the field of subjectivity and poetry, he orientates the scientific method towards the discovery of the fundamental constitution of the world, articulated through the minimal language of mathematics and geometry (199).

The story, as told by the author, does not stop there but goes on to talk about Descartes, Hegel, Husserl, Peirce and Buchler, in 90 pages! The weakness, perhaps, of this second section of the history is that it does not nourish one of the author’s main theses: the idea that philosophy’s reflection on method has suppressed and dissimulated the intuitions of the Sophists concerning the essential rhetoricity of any method. Indeed, there are, here and there, rhetorical rays of light, notably in the Peircian developments of pragmatism. It hence becomes difficult to understand the role that this block of 90 pages has to play. The ambition of offering a total portrait, unfortunately, makes us lose sight of what should always be clear and visible: namely, the ambition’s object.

General Appreciation and Remarks

This book certainly deserves to be read and studied. Indeed, it deals with an important theme, method, and, through its strengths and weaknesses, this book offers a ‘performative proof’ of the difficulty of the task at hand. One

can only salute the author's effort I certainly do so. As to whether the author succeeds in his attempt to think and articulate a method that would be adequate to interpretation, a method based on the intuitions of phenomenology, I do not think that I can here give a straight answer to that question; one would probably need to read the second volume of the tetralogy. However, after the "death of the subject" (230), after the Deleuzian and Foucauldian developments in Continental philosophy over the last forty years, it seems difficult at face value to see what phenomenology, burdened by its Cartesian and Kantian baggage, can bring to this project without the project sinking into the dark and transcendental waters of theology (considering what contemporary phenomenology has become through thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy and Emmanuel Lévinas, for example). The author indeed presents his project as an attempt to present the Interpreter as a "necessary *floating* frame of reference and generator of signification" (230, the emphasis is mine); but what is not so clear is how this frame of reference manages to float and defy the metaphysical laws of gravity.

There is a last point that I must discuss before ending this reportage: if, really, the intention of the author is to reunite the humanities and the natural sciences in the rhetorical light of a human quest for knowledge, the absence of a rigorous treatment of contemporary methodological discussions in the philosophy of sciences and in the natural sciences themselves is an absence that is unfortunate and troubling.

This absence raises a second question: what is the exact nature of the "crisis of method" that the author speaks about? Are the natural sciences really touched by it? And if not, why should they (the natural sciences) worry about the preoccupations of a philosopher of hermeneutics, especially if they are doing quite well? My suspicion is that the author does not react to a new and contemporary crisis, but rather reacts to an older crisis, a crisis of the legitimacy of the humanities faced with the successes of natural sciences (an old crisis indeed). Hence, the idea of reuniting the natural sciences and the humanities under the light of a hermeneutical method that is conscious of its own rhetoricity appears to be but a new attempt to articulate the romantic project that seeks to unite Man and Nature as proposed by Schlegel, for example: "all art should become science, all science should become art."

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