

LOOKING ACROSS THE SURFACE OF WORDS IN NICHOL'S "THE MARTYROLOGY" VIA THE GAME THEORY AND GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICAL METHOD

Clementina Mihăilescu, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu

Abstract: Book 5 of bp Nichol's "The Martyrology" will be closely approached via Clark's considerations on the risks of miscommunication that arise when the relationship between signifier and signified becomes shifty and less intelligible. Such a linguistic reality is well illustrated through bp Nichol's ingenious linguistic games with words with a view to reporting the distorted image of the modern world full of strong moral conflicts, anxieties, dispiritualization and deprivation of cultural and moral values. Since such an intercultural dialogue with Nichol suggests the historical mobility of human existence charged with profound spiritual and religious connotations, Gadamer's hermeneutical method will be also observed in the sense of revealing that "historical conscience is circumscribed to a single horizon which is in a perpetual transformation and which incorporates both the present and the past, the material and the spiritual", the latter presented by Nichol as distorted, due to the moral crisis of humanity.

Keywords: Nichol's "The Martyrology", linguistic games, Gadamer, hermeneutical method, historical conscience

This paper tackles a delicate issue, namely what we find if we look across the surface significance of Nichol's "The Martyrology". A good starting point to approach it would be the beginning of Book 5. But this task is not simple because Book 5 offers more than one beginning in its four epigraphs and two little pages. I will focus on the first epigraph which contains a three-word game:

Blue

Bluer

Bloor

This linguistic gaming with words apparently makes no sense unless it is associated with an anecdote from Caxton, also present in Book 5, on a separate page. It is an anecdote about the risks of miscommunication that arise when the relationship between the signifier and the signified has become shifty and less intelligible. This relationship is distorted due to the infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes, which combine and form networks not accessible through the conventional reading methods or habits. New meanings result from the redistribution of blank spaces, shifting words, puns (bluer, bloor) etc.

As we have already noticed, there is an obvious imprecision and the semantic depth of words is constantly threatened by the slipperiness of their lettered surface. Nichol writes in Chain 1 "Looking out across the surface of words today the letters are not my or me".

He deprives the language of its prior semantic determination and is concerned with the play of its subsemantic constituents.

Book 5 abounds in instances of this kind:

I mine, the language for the heard world or
Writers struggle as I do
Make a memo
Join the torn letters of the language.

The choice of verbs is itself significant. Nichol is looking across the surface of the language that is mined, torn, mended. In another more consistent passage, Nichol self-consciously draws attention to the disseminative breakage of language, to blank spaces, shifting words and puns by describing what he is doing:

This multiplication
 Attention to a visual duration
 Comic stripping of the bare phrase
 The pain inside the language speaks.
 Ekes out meaning phase by phase
 Make my way through the maze of streets and message,
 Reading as I go
 Creating narratives by attention to a flow of signs
 Each street branches in the mind
 Puns break
 Words fall apart
 A shell
 Sure as hell's
 Ash ell
 When I let the letters shift surface
 Is just a place on which images drift.

Nichol's method is clearly stated; he comically strips the bare phrase, attends to the "flow of signs", makes the puns break, and consequently, the words fall apart: the semantic depth is constantly threatened by the slipperiness of their constituent letters.

For example "a shell" leads us to the colloquial "sure as hell's", only to finally break into the non-sensical collocation "ash ell". Equally attractive are the breakage of surface into surface and of images into images.

Clark suggests that in a radical sense, linguistic free play is central to a poststructuralist theory of language (1980:18). In Book 5, Chain 3, Nichol, the inspired puppeteers who practises his poststructuralist language show, helps us to identify "laughter" and playfulness in the graphic dismemberment of the article "the"

T he
 Hee hee
 Ha ha
 Ho ho
 Though I know it's no laughing matter some days
 A sum of ways
 Weighs the measured writing of the poem.

The phonic split, from the first line, appears separating "t" from the pattern "he". It appears as being linguistically necessary for new significance to be conferred upon the aggregate of letters.

Consequently, the "he" pattern is invested with strong playful implications in the second line, by adding the extra vowel "e" and turning it into the repeated pattern "hee, hee". In the third line, the replacement of double "ee" with "a" and the resultative repetitive pattern "ha, ha", betrays a disturbing hilarious atmosphere.

In the fourth line, Nichol replaces the playful syntagm “ha, ha” with “ho, ho”, announcing, through this acoustic metaphor, that a certain unhappy price is to be paid for this playfulness.

Meaning unveils itself in the fourth line through the syntagm “it’s no laughing matter.” Gravity is alluded to in the fifth line, through the syntagm “a sum of ways”. It may imply the measureless, incalculable possibilities that arise once the letters are unleashed.

The syntagm “the measured writing of the poem” from the last line, brings us closer to Nichol’s reconsideration of this playfulness which must be kept sometimes under control, or, must come off more soberly because of the need to impose some order upon the chaotic linguistic matter out of which poetry is made.

Some other lines from Book 5, Chain 1 reveal another facet of the poet who compares himself to “narcissus” who turns the surface of words into a fatally attractive “simulacrum of the self” (1980:19):

Narcissus as it was so long ago
E go
And maybe even I go
O go s poe goed
Edgarishly
All a narcissistically
So u go.

Here, Nichol's movement through the language's maize of messages is sustained by various associations of the verbal nucleus "go": "A go" announces the destruction of the temporal coherence; "e go" alludes to the destruction of the psychological coherence; "I go" confirms the fact that the poet continues his movement through the labyrinth of the language and that new and unexpected patterns are only waiting to be surfaced in order to shock us.

The radically deviant syntagm “o go s poe goed” sounds very much like the mythical creature Ogotropo. “Edgarishly” is another clear instance that signifiers are capable of yielding multiple meanings, claims Clark (1980: 18).

Clark also suggests that it alludes to Shakespeare, more precisely to Gloucester's mad son. The last two lines "all a narcissistically / So u go" implies total annihilation of semantic coherence.

Clark's argument is extremely relevant regarding such apparently non-signifying linguistic patterns. He claims that each pattern functions as a "phenomenal displacement of what cannot be experienced meaningfully" (1980:17). And yet, there is one thing that can be meaningfully experienced: the idea of freedom by laughing (hee hee, ha ha, ho ho, Edgarishly, O go s poe goed).

Clark also notices that Nichol's free play is illustrated in the same radical manner through the game of saint names, more specifically through the word shift "storm" into St Orm in the poem which bears the saint's name (1980:17). It shows the way Nichol exploits the linguistic possibilities to report the grey tragedy of the modern world full of strong moral conflicts, anxieties, despiritualization and deprivation of moral values. St Orm stands for the very opposite. The poet passes through a gnoseological crisis, artistically transfigured in various metaphorical constructions.

You were THE DARK WALKER
 Stood by my side as a kid
 I barely remember
 Except the heaven I dream of
 Was a land of clouds
 You moved at your whim
 Knowing I walked
 The bottom of a sea
 That heaven was up there
 On that world in the sky
 That this was death
 That I would go there
 When I came to life
 How do you tell the story?
 Saint Orm you were the one
 You saw the sun rise
 Knew the position of the stars
 How far we had to go
 Before the ultimate destruction
 As it was prophesied in REVELATIONS
 Nations would turn away from god and be destroyed
 Told me the difference between now and then
 When I could no longer tell the beasts from men.

As knowledge means suffering, the stronger Saint Orm's knowledge of the world grew as he saw the sun rise and knew the position of the stars, the more his suffering increased.

The dichotomy "beast-men" in the line "When I could no longer tell the beasts from men" poetically synthesizes the cause of moral anguish: the fact that the world has flown from God's hands. The betrayal of the original Paradise, grammatically supported by the past tense, is further dramatized through signs of disintegration, sustained by the alliterative series: dark, stood, kid, dream, land, clouds, death and by the rhythmic couplet "men / then" from the line: "Told me the difference between now and then / When I could no longer tell the beasts from men."

The dichotomy "now-then" launches the solution: the return towards innocence through faith. The question "how do you tell the story?" marks poetically the tragical ontological separation between soul and spirit. The soul represents the prime co-participative self that figuratively walked on the bottom of the sea in vain looking for some spiritual meaning, as the sea is the paradigm of the new life. The syntagm "that heaven was up there" reveals the spiritual distance suggested by the demonstrative adjective "that", which poetically hints at spiritual tension. As the poet receives no answer, the line ends in despair, which is lyrically orchestrated in the mythical metaphor of ultimate destruction.

The lyrical scenario is characterized by intense dramatism. The poetic discourse multiplies the signs of final disintegration culminating in the syntagm "prophesied in Revelations". Moral decline is suggested through the alliterative pairs "go / get", and "destruction / destroyed". Chaos and disorder are also suggested through the rhythmic patterns, a combination of the iamb and the anapest.

And yet, the association of the “dark walker” from the first line, with “kid”, from the second, forces us into contemplating an unexpected aesthetic and semantic effect. By associating suffering and purity spiritual brotherhood is suggested.

Saint Orm helps us reconsider Nichol’s linguistic and poetic contributions in the sense that they can be read as an act of desperation (2008: 21), of awakening our moral conscience in a monstrously indifferent inhuman age.

Since such an intercultural dialogue with Nichol suggests the historical mobility of human existence charged with profound spiritual and religious connotations, Gadamer’s hermeneutical method will be also observed. The hermeneutical theory implies that the productive interpretation of a text leads to the effective meaning of it. Taking into account Saussure’s linguistic theory, the signified is the poem itself, while the emotions transmitted stand for the signifier. Therefore, as Gadamer assumes, a literary work belongs to a “fusion of horizons” (2001: 226), where, the past, the time in which the poem was written, which drives apart as time passes by merges with the present which constitutes the moment when the poem is read and decoded. In this specific poem, the past experience is illustrated through verbs in the past tense and the line “Stood by my side as a kid”. The present is suggested by the syntagm “between now and then” and by thanking Saint Orm for his help. This dichotomy symbolizes the return to innocence, which means from present to past.

As Gadamer mentions, “our historical conscience” (2001:232) is circumscribed to a single horizon, which evolves, transforms, including both past and present. The poet could not have written the poem without the past experience and the continuous presence of Saint Orm. Furthermore, comprehension arises from the horizons existing for the self: that means personal views, experiences, emotions etc. Everything is subjective. Gadamer even states that the writer can adopt a past horizon in order to improve the present one. To conclude the mixing of horizons necessarily implies a recuperation of historical past events together with our own understanding of them so that they could be turned into a genuine literary work.

Bibliography

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