THE EDUCATIONAL POWER OF POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This short paper is intented to present the structure and main outcomes of an educational project realized in some primary schools in the municipal district of Arezzo (Tuscany, Italy). More specifically, the project in question, entitled "The magic of poetry", aimed to actualize a laboratory proposal of education to poetry and through poetry, in particular by exploiting the interplay between three figures of speech (simile, metaphor, oxymoron) and three emotions connected with them (happiness, anger, fear). The project involved children attending the second and fifth grade of six primary schools, both located in the city center and in the outskirts. Therefore, the first part of this article synthetically describes the basic framework, the contents, the activities, the organizational modalities and the educational objectives of the project; while the second part shows the obtained results as they ensue from direct observation, from students'opinions, and from a qualitative survey (open ended questionnaire) which implicated teachers.

KEYWORDS: education, emotions, figures of speech, poetry, primary school.

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in an era in which the seductive power of both oral and written language gives way to the charm of the image (television, advertising, internet) and these images, included the ones from contemporary art, bow to the commercializing and consumer subjection of the symbolic, saying not so more than this [2]. We live in an era in which the aesthetics of a community are entrusted to emulated appearance and to the ephemeral manyfold identities it guarantees, whereas the transience of such people's community bonds makes a match with the transience of the lexicons used to fullfill fashion dictates of the moment or the consumer trend [3]. We live in an era in which the unindifferentiated overabundance of the informations spread by the screen-culture facilitates individual's silent passivity, that makes him/her loose, at the same time, both the compass and a method for a conscious discernment [8]. An era in which indolent mechanicalness prevails on critical flexibility, as a cryterion through which it is possible to react to every input by mass media. In which verbal interaction is more and more shaped and surrogated by new media. In which technological progress induces people to linguistic synthesis, to the use of

neo-telegraphic expressions or mere replacement icons, strengthening conversational weakness [1]. In which the tendency to talk through slogans, annihilating all the pathos inherent in an authentic communication – as H. G. Gadamer has shown with the example of modern lovers' conversation [6] – gains the upper hand, as well as the use of an excessive and confused verbosity in order to surpass other people, to disorient them and to get out of listening to them (not only in the political environment) [9]. Talking of lovers, not a long time ago I attended a theatrical performance by a comedian who, together with one of his female colleagues, pretended to have dinner at a restaurant like a young engaged couple. Between one dish and another, between one bite and another, silence prevailed. There was no communication at all. Or rather, it was replaced by short messages they sent one another by means of their respective smartphones. The contents, short and curt, were all just about the dinner and, to be precise, their opinions referred to the courses. And besides, the whole performance was enriched by photos of every dish immediately posted on the web in order to share them with their Facebook friends and Twitter followers. This situation naturally caused belly laughter and I abandoned myself to laughter too, but shortly after I had a feeling of sadness and desolation. What I had seen, actually, did not distance itself from reality, and today it still does not. The fact of the matter is that in our era speech becomes superfluous, both because of the technological impact and the repercussions caused by an ethic ruled by the utilitarian distortions of economic action, affecting relational dimension and the blunting of critical abilities. At least the thought-out and chosen speech, which witnesses the authenticity of one's way of being, thinking and feeling, which reflects an active identity, which is able to tell us about the others and to open up to them, which nourishes the conviviality of the differences, which escapes the dull grey of uniformity and standardized desire to colour everyday life with vivid tints. What remains is an impoverished, trivialized, devoiced speech, something which is a sign of intellectual weariness and expressive difficulty, useful to make oneself understood but not caught. Moreover, due to social disintegration and the strengthening of the relativism of cultural and value-related horizons in view of the fall of strong models and the absence of universally sharable perspectives, speech becomes ambiguous so that it avoids to make itself understood: ambiguity, actually, shows the will of not fully revealing oneself, to escape the genuine contact with diversity, to maintain a borderline, to wiggle out of one's commitment and social and intercultural responsibility, to linger undisturbed inside the protective shell of one's loneliness and one's convictions [7].

The reasons I've just illustrated have urged me to publish a volume in which I argued the pedagogical reasons that could legitimate the recovery of the educational value of poetry, in order to bring the voice back to human thought and speech, to consult them again, and to raise the person from the prevailing prose of hyper-technologism, hyper-consumerism and hyper-individualism [4].

In the facing of this theme, I dealt with several aspects and, among them, I also criticized the widespread way of teaching poetry in Italian primary schools, proposing an alternative hypothesis. In fact, at school poetry is usually limited to mnemonic learning, or it is used only to know certain authors, or to sharpen logic and grammatical analysis skills. It is rarely considered as an educational means in itself, a means for a human growth, both from the perspective of fruition and from the one (almost forgotten) of production. Consequently, I decided to put the theory of the above-mentioned volume in practice, by starting off an experimental project about education to poetry and through poetry, realized in six primary schools in the district of Arezzo: I pivoted on only three of the innumerable instruments that crowd the toolbox through which poetical language operates (simile, metaphor, oxymoron), and I focused on the production side, not on the fruition one. The experimentation started on the fifteenth of November 2002 and ended on the ninth of May 2003. The complexity of this project is clearly explained in the text *The magic of poetry* [5]. In 2013, on the occasion of my Erasmus Teaching at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of *Transylvania* University of Braşov, accepting the referring professor's request, I explained some features of my work to the students, and from this point forward it originated the invitation to make a presentation of the experimentation at this Conference, since the theme is congenial for its development. Seeing that the time at my disposal does not allow close examinations, the following exposition will be brief and essential.

2. THE EDUCATIONAL PROJECT

Intended target and timing: the protagonists of this laboratory experience are students attending the second and fifth year of six primary schools, for a total of nine classes, and the schedule, planned with the principals (initially it consisted in six meetings), allowed me to fix three meetings lasting two hours for each laboratory realized in each class.

Contents: I facilitated children's introduction to the world of poetry by using the sphere of emotions as a motivational means. The leading themes of each meeting were, indeed, happiness (first meeting), anger (second) and fear (third). As I said before, I did not avail myself of such emotions because they could become the object of a psychological evaluation, but rather, because they could represent a stimulating starting point to undertake the path to the discovery of the poetical world and, nevertheless, because the solicitation of emotional intelligence could adequately support poetical production, which is connoted in itself by an inexorable emotional-affective substratum.

Activity and methods: within the laboratories, a gradual process of approaching to poetical language was activated, and its steps are outlined below in chronological order of appearance.

Listening to music: only for the happiness theme, I made the students listen to F. J. Haydn's *Toys Symphony* (*Kindersinfonie*), so as to create an atmosphere of collective joy, playfulness, and, therefore, an environment and a mood capable of stirring up "happy thoughts" and their following conversion with an imaginative-fantastic key.

Report of the memories: the student was asked to recover memories, in this case the ones relating to situations, events and experiences ascribable to a state of happiness, anger and fear. So starting from the memory, the following step was an oral and written report of the chosen episode.

Drawing: drawing was employed in every kind of intervention (happiness, anger and fear) to satisfy a twofold need: a) to keep the children's attention high, by varying the form of their commitment (from writing to drawing) through an usually relished task; b) to broaden the range of children's creative energies by means of the translation of their emotional lived experiences into a non-spoken language. And that, moreover, allowed to worm details of the recounted episodes that were impossible to express in oral or written way, with the consequent opportunity of increasing child's consciousness and enriching the sense of his life history.

Individual production of similes, metaphors and oxymorons: once the drawing was finished and after having supplied a propaedeutic exemplification of the three figures of speech, I asked the students to turn the contents of their artworks into five similes, metaphors and oxymorons. In order to facilitate their work, the students were invited to take the cue from animal and plant environment, and from their most significant extracurricular activities. The theme of happiness was linked to the similes, anger to the metaphors and fear to the oxymorons.

Group discussion: the discussion, conceived in a perspective of moral education, was inserted to implement an open confrontation about the expressions (similes, metaphors and oxymorons) worked out by children, to goad them into choosing one of the five – on the basis of their personal taste and other people's taste, of their emotional affection and other people's emotional affection –, and, finally, to negotiate together which expressions could be selected to pave the way for the last step: collective poetical production.

Individual poetical production: before reaching the final step, the pupils were asked to freely undertake a spontaneous individual poetical versification (without any metrical, shape and sense bonds), which could include all five of the similes, metaphors and oxymorons they conceived (obviously, one work for each leading theme).

Collective poetical production.

Acrostic: I deliberately left for last the acrostic because its use has been multipurpose, and that requires an explanation. I noticed some second-grade

children's difficulties in understanding the concept of oxymoron, so in these cases acrostic was used as a substitute for it. In other cases, instead, it was used together with similes, metaphors and oxymorons, as well as individual and collective productions, because it was particularly appreciated by pupils.

Educational goals: the predetermined goals are as listed: a) to perceive the diversity of poetical language from the ordinary one, by means of the increasing consciousness of its polysemy and its semantic ambiguity; b) to strengthen pupils' linguistic competences; c) to take advantage of the "introspective gaze" of poetical language to translate the subjective interpretation of reality; d) to decontextualize and recontextualize speech to recognize its different uses and meanings (broadening of lexical competence); e) to facilitate the emergence of the critical, lateral and divergent thinking; f) to promote the decentralization and the acceptance of different emotional, cognitive and experential perspectives.

Final test: for the evaluative phase, methods of a qualitative nature were adopted, by proposing open ended questionnaire to teachers (a month after the end of the project) and by asking the pupils autographical reflections and tales regarding the project in its entirety. The questions posed to the teachers are listed below: Question 1. *Before the educational project was carried out, how did the pupils welcome teacher's proposal to realize it?* Question 2. *During the three lessons how was, in your opinion, students' behaviour? Did they keep their level of attention, interest and curiosity in comparison with "ordinary lessons"?* Question 3. *Did the students, during other lessons, make references to the contents carried out by the project, or did they perceive them as something in itself and separate from the regular educational path?* Question 4. *At the level of interpersonal dynamics, in your opinion did "The magic of poetry" influence students' behaviour? (For example: if one or some of them showed interest in the proposed themes, did the others jeer at them? If one or some of them did not show interest in it, did the others urge them to participate?)* Question 5. *Which were, in your opinion, the project's repercussions at the level of learning mechanisms? (For example: do the pupils use the terms learned during the three lessons, do they refer to another point of view on reality?)* Question 6. *Do the students still practise or did they practise further on the contents learned during the project? If yes, are they still interested and/or amused?* Question 7. *Did students' families hear the echo of such experience lived by their children?* Question 8. *In your opinion, which is poetry's contribution to the development of children's educational processes?* Question 9. *In your opinion, which is poetry's contribution (in particular collective poetical production) with regard to socialization and culturalization processes and to pupils' moral education?* Question 10. *According to you, was the duration of the project meagre or adequate?* Question 11. *Personal considerations about the project and its realization.*

3. MAIN RESULTS

Given that the ultimate aim of this project was not to train budding poets, but rather to make use of poetry and its "tools" – starting at such a tender age and in view of a desirable educational and self-educational continuum – to revitalize and toughen up the ramparts of a speech weakened and threatened by several "enemies", as well as to facilitate the "clarification" of the subject's critical-creative potentialities, even though the time at the project's disposal was inadequate, however it is undeniable that encouraging results were achieved. Moreover these results are not confined within the circumscribed perimeter of the project duration and they also extend their range of action beyond the goals planned at the beginning of the project. In light of the foregoing need to synthesis above-mentioned, I am going to show, now and briefly, only the most significant aspects of the many results deducted through a direct observation, the answers given by the teachers and the pupils' opinions.

First of all, the use of the figures of speech, especially simile and metaphor, determined the expansion of semantic-lexical competences and enabled children to discover certain "relationships between the things" that led them to both a cognitive and emotional-affective enrichment.

In the matter of the cognitive sphere, that was possible thanks precisely to the nature of these figures of speech and their ability to match different semantic fields and different entities, shortening the ostensible distance or eliminating the degrees of separation between them. In other words, the children had the chance not only to understand what such figures are and what they are for, but also that these figures (just as acrostic) can offer an unprecedented perspective angle on subjective existence and the surrounding world that logical-rational thinking and language cannot offer. Then, the fact that it is possible to read the same reality through various lenses induced the children, without any other-directed indication, to consult speech, to ask questions about the sense of what they were reading or were absorbing from television, to autonomously search for the various synonyms of a term and to decontextualize words in order to discern different uses and meanings. And this did not happen in conjunction with the realization of the project, but afterwards, in the course of the regular lessons that dealt with Italian, History, Geography and Science, when there was no longer a "new teacher" to please and when the excitement caused by the novelty had disappeared.

With regard to the emotional-affective sphere, the resulting enrichment is due to the synergy between "the alternative gaze" made possible by these figures and the substance of the leading themes. Leveraging the delocalization of his/her inner feeling, moving his/her own happiness, anger and fear to other objects, phenomena or individuals, the child was enabled to look at him/herself from the outside and to know him/herself on a deeper level, to depict

him/herself in a different way, to a point where child assumes empathetically the emotional state he/she attributed to the chosen objects, phenomena or individuals and recognizes him/herself in them again, as inside a virtuous circle. Just to make an example, sometimes it happened that a child, beyond the lesson and more significantly at the end of the experimentation, addressed me or the teacher to express his/her feelings, referring to what he had experienced within the class. I am going to report next a little girl's own words: "today I am angry, and my anger is a cut down pine". After having pronounced this sentence, she then reported, in her opinion, how the pine could feel to the point of being moved because of its condition, and she ended up exclaiming: "there, I feel this way!". Incidentally, this turning to the animal and plant world promoted unexpected reflection of an ecological kind.

Back to emotions, a further salient fact is that the group discussion, encouraging the comparison between different pasts and their reciprocal reception, stood out similar or even identical causes of the same situation of anger or fear, cheering the child up about the chance of running into the grip of these causes individually. In fact, I often heard these words: "this thing happened to you too, then it did not happen only to me!". So naturally emerged a feeling of brotherhood and commonality, inferable from the approach to the schoolmate or the schoolmates and from the intensification of the communication between them. It is opportune to reaffirm that these are only observations, far from any psychological interpretation which does not lie with me.

One more time referring to emotional-affective enrichment, in the end I ought to make known the metaphorization of reality and the use of similes and oxymorons, expanding interpretative abilities, incited to the research of original modalities for expressing happiness and managing or attenuating fear and anger (but only in fifth grade classes). For example, if a child said that he/she was feeling happy like a blossoming flower or like a singing bird, then it was not unusual to see him/her, during the course of the project and after, expressing a new kind of happiness by imitating such blossoming flower or singing bird. If a child said that he/she was feeling angry and his/her anger was like the roar of a lion in a cage, it was not unusual that he/she wandered how to solve the problem of the lion (that is his/her problem), warning that he/she would break the bars or would obtain somehow the keys of that cage. If a child said that he/she felt scared and that his/her fear was a still movement (movement because of the will to run away, still because you often remain petrified), it was not unusual that he/she asked which was the best reaction between the two.

Regarding other results, now I would like to dwell on the group discussion. Like any other cooperative activity, also the one promoted had positive implications in terms of mediation between egocentric and hetero-centric instances. Nevertheless, it seems that the added value was the teaching

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inherent in the appropriation of the deep meaning that metaphor guards, that is the celebration of the cognitive and hermeneutic pluralism. Reflecting upon some answers by teachers and some writings by students it is possible to deduce that metaphor's invitation to get inside other points of view had analogically encouraged a democratic negotiation. However, on the basis of my observation and the major part of the opinions I gathered, I believe that the emotional foundation of the activities and the inclination for giving life to something objectively beautiful, recognized as such by most of the people, actually made the difference instead of a normal cooperative activity. But there is the other side of the coin. In some cases (two classes) attention-seeking and competitiveness spirit reached considerable high level when the whole class had to decide which contributions should be excluded in the composition of the collective poem or which words for the realization of the acrostic. If sound competition produced poetic expressions or simply noteworthy linguistic expressions, egoism and primarily self-referential exclusivity prevailed during this phase. Without making the pupils feel guilty, who are still "children" with difficulties in mediating between oneself and the others, the "objective beauty" was hardly rewarded; it was rather the belonging to the dominant group of the class that marked a division between a rejection or a promotion.

The last thing to underline, that actually lies outside the project but highlights important pedagogical, sociological and psychological aspects, relates to the environmental conditions that influence and regulate the experience of fear. From the testimonies of children living in a city, it comes into light that the its streets are seen as a labyrinth that can suddenly disclose dangers and insurmountable obstacles; the dimensions and the distances of the city restrict freedom of movement and the will to explore the "world"; condominium relationships are limited to the formality of a superficial relation; social responsibility dissolves and becomes indifference and private interest. This leads to distrust and fear of city meanders, and, in particular, of other people, that is sharpened by domestic loneliness, caused by parents' absence due to working reasons: staying alone at home provokes anxiety and agitation, every noise is presage of a gloomy event, an unexpected visitation by a stranger is perceived as a source of anguish; then, the home door becomes a wall which defends from external attacks and all the other elements from the outside have a negative connotation, whilst all the ones inside could turn out to be useful for personal defence (baseball bats, cooking tools, etc.). In this way children use bounce from videogames to television, whose horror movies and documentaries about fierce animals contribute to foment their fears, acting directly on their unconscious, since it shows a virtual reality that is not mediated by anyone and, therefore, not conveniently analyzed, interpreted and assimilated. In the life of a small country town, on the contrary, the streets are like labyrinths in which loosing oneself is like a pleasant game to play; distances are limited and the

traffic almost absent; the desire of discovering the "world" is supported by a close relation with nature; urban loneliness leaves room to an educating community and the involvement into social life is quite obliged. In conclusion, a different environmental configuration and the presence of a social network which grants a sort of mutual assistance allow children to live everyday life in a less "phobic" way and more freely, and instead of television (although not absent) it is the neighbour who takes care of the child, the courtyard, the square with its social circles, with the grocery shop, with the elderly people, with the priest, with the friends who invite to play together.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Considering all that I have reported and the pupils' enthusiastic participation in the project, I can conclude that a different way of teaching poetry at school not only is possible, but also pedagogically inescapable for a complete education.

As already shown, if it is conceived as an educational instrument with its own dignity and not as a marginal appendage at the logical and formal service of language learning (Italian or Romanian), the use of the poetical language can contribute to the improvement of the lexical heritage and to the recovery of the vividness of the speech, affecting on the reorganization of the conceptual system.

In the same way, it can increase the centre of the conscious subjectivity (reflections on the self, on one's story, one's environment, one's sub-culture) and allows the individual to venture into other vital worlds in order to understand the limits, the conditionings and the resources of his/her own world, and then to come back into him/herself enriched by the meeting/confrontation with different experiences and different "faces". In this perspective, poetry rises to the status of main means to know both the self and the otherness.

Besides, the use of the poetical language can contribute to free the person from the standardizing and superstructural pressures of today's society, ensuring the right of expressive originality, the active maturation of singularity, the practice of critical thinking, the training of the creative abilities, the conscious interpretation of reality and of being into reality. Without considering that, through the effusion of the creative forces, it can give prestige back to the often neglected right cerebral hemisphere, enhancing man's unitariness at the expense of his rational mono-dimension.

All in all, poetry can educate the person to be the protagonist of her life, to search for the authenticity of the dialogue and to become acquainted with a taste and an aesthetic sensibility that go beyond the boundaries of appearance to fall back on the human substance of thought and speech.

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