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A Favourite Analogy: The Microcosm

ABSTRACT. As pre-scientific cognitive tool, the analogy is very important during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Although it underlies the metaphor in rhetorics, the analogy as *similitudo* comes under dialectics, in its theorization of the Renaissance (by Rudolf Agricola or Ramus). This « locus » of dialectical invention allows to build up semantical nets with surprising extension according to the historical moment. This contribution proposes to study this major theme in its historical changes from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance in the erudite literature, like the *Roman de la Rose* or *Placides et Timeo*, first doxographical dialogue in vernacular language, then in various dialogues of the XVIth century (for example, Pontus de Tyard for the Pléiade or Pierre Viret for the Reformation, among others ; the last author using in his *Dialogues of the disorder* (1545) the mirror of animals for the socratical quest of the self). At least, it shows how this instrument for cognition and for discursive *cornucopia* binds man with cosmos in various beautiful proportions.

KEY WORDS: analogy, microcosm, Middle Ages, Renaissance.

Theoretically, analogy is a very important cognitive tool mostly for all periods prior to modernity. In the pre-scientific era, it allowed the building of meaningful semantic nets in what Michel Foucault called “l’enchevêtrement des choses et des êtres” (the tangle of things and beings), in his famous book *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966).¹

In fact, analogy is based on similitude, but similitude is a notion built semantically in history and philosophy; it depends indeed on the ontological organization of being in each age. The allegory, on the other hand, is defined as a closed concept including semantical units as the virtues, Mod-

¹ [Foucault, 1966, pp. 81 ff ; Descola, 2006].

esty, for example. The interest of the allegory concerning the microcosm consists in the fact that it includes an analogy: the essential relation between microcosm and macrocosm. Therefore its semantical contents can receive different interpretations according to the epistemology through history.

Fundamentally, Plato's *Timaeus* sets up a global conception of the world including man and the Soul of the world as the Soul; their similitude is not object of theorization. In the Middle Ages, this harmonization gives rise to a systematization in degrees of nature (as Scot Erigène, in the XIIth century), whose man would be the conclusion (as Alain de Lille).

This present study, limited to the appearance of the allegory of microcosm in the French literature till the scientific modernity, includes some medieval texts and especially some texts of the Renaissance which testify the big favour of this allegory.

Theories in the Renaissance

In the XVI century very interesting theories about analogy were developed in the humanist circles, wishing to oppose the pure scolastical logic a more flexible method, more adapted to the analysis of the real and to natural language before the scientific turn towards modernity.

It is about rhetorics and dialectics. The more conceptual field of dialectics regards the *similitudo* and *dissimilitudo* in relationship to the definition of notions as crucial. In Rudolf Agricola's first humanist theory (*De inventione dialectica*, (1515),² both come under the external *loci* of invention, beyond the internal ones which concern the definition of things according to Aristotles, consististing in genre, in species, and in *proprium* (their special qualities); Agricola adds their properties "around substance" as a semantical larger nucleus (not fully logical) – see the first book of the *De inventione dialectica* regarding the "loci" of invention [Agricola, 1529,

² Cf. [Agricola, 1529, p. 22].

p. 22]. The *similitudo* is thus a term well categorized at the beginning of the analysis of notions.

These principles are also espoused by Pierre de La Ramée (or Petrus Ramus) in his *Dialectique* of 1555. He maintained the dialectical role of the *similitudo* under the “loci” of invention, but he preferred to place it under the first “loci”, even before the definition, which was, according to him, only derived from them. These theoretical differences allow us to see the instability of the new humanist systematization between logic and rhetoric – and the term self of invention is then genuinely rhetorical, but integrated by dialectics; it also makes evident the richness of the notion (quite like the double abundancy of things and words, from Erasmus, *De duplici copia rerum ac verborum*³, in accordance with his rhetorical point of view). Cognition and invention are thus one and the same thing for Renaissance men.

The famous allegory of the microcosm illustrates these comments well when it brings together the macrocosm, the “big world” and man through similitude, as the “little world”. This complex representation includes some fundamental “sèmes” (semantical units) which become richer between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. For simplifying this approach, the nets of these units are called « chains of similitude »; the similitude becoming an epistemological operator for variations. First in Jean de Meung’s *Roman de la Rose* around 1270; then in the doxographical Dialogue in French, *Placides et Timéo* (at the end of the thirteenth century); then in the Renaissance, the *Curieux* of Pontus de Tyard, two pre-scientific dialogues (between 1557 and 1578), and lastly, in Réformateur Pierre Viret’s heuristic variant, the *Dialogues du désordre* of the (1545) as well as Maurice Scève’s epic the *Microcosme* (1562).

The Middle Ages' growing similitudes

In *Roman de la Rose*, the poet praises the man-microcosm:

³ Cf. [Erasmus, 1988].

“When he would be couragous and waise, he has all the virtues that God has given to the world. He shares all things contained in the world and participates to all their kindness; he has his being with the stones; he lives with the grass; he feels with the animals and understands with the angels [...] It is a little new world, when he doesn’t make worsen then a jounwolf !” [v. 19043-19058].⁴

In these verses, the poet assigns man cosmic roots, as the “companion of all things” in the levels of being in the world; the mineral, the vegetable, the animal and the angelic. This concerns a semantic construction where man participates in the universe and the supra-natural in accordance with the medieval ontology. These semantic units build the first chain of similitudes, i.e. the so to speak *nucleus* of the allegory.

The next text, *Placides et Timéo*, presents a second chain of *similitudes*: the elements, the cosmos and the body, in a somewhat different way from the former. This net includes the four elements (heaven, air, sea, and earth) compared through similitude with parts of the body: the head with the heaven, the torso with the air, the stomach with the sea and the feet with the earth; and more, the head extends the referential dimensions to the “throsne of Dieu”, defined as its « lord” and meaning. The eyes lastly are depicted as two stars to the moon and the sun.⁵

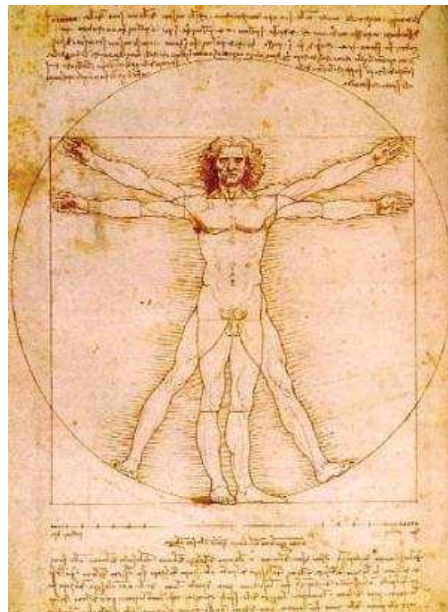
Each one of the analogies becomes more poetic than descriptive complements to reveal better the “secrets” of nature which the teacher, Timeo, passes on to his pupil; this Dialogue is in the classical tradition of the *Secretum secretorum*, as a letter from Aristotle to Alexander, brought to us by the Arabs; it is about the education of a prince which includes few comparisons; “as through the air run winds, clouds and obscurities, so in the mind

⁴ « S’il vousist estre preuz et sages : / De toutes les vertuz habonde / Que Dieus a mises en cest monde ; / Compainz est de toutes les choses / Qui sont en tout le monde encloses / Et de leurs bontez garçonnières : Il a son estre avoec les pierres, / Il vit avoec les herbes drues / Et sant avoec les bestes mues ; / Encor puet il trop plus en tant / Qu’il avoec les anges entent. / Que vous puis je plus recenser ? / Il a quanque l’en puet penser : / C’est uns petiz mondes nouviaux – / Cist me fait pis que nus louviaux ! the edition of [Meun and Lorris, 1992, p. 988]. Vocabulary: « Moult a li chaitis d’avantages » = il a de nombreux avantages ; « de leurs bontez garçonnières », = il participe de ; « quanque » = tous ; « pis que nus louviaux ! » = pire qu’un louveteau.

⁵ M.-A. Schmidt quotes a famous illustration from the *Elucidarium* of Honoré d’Autun, *ibid.*, p. 140.

of man fly thoughts, happiness, sadness”; or “as the waters run in the sea and return, so the humours of man have to flow down to the stomach”, etc⁶).

Yet this allegorical net presents a semantic shift compared to the previous anthropological insight, spread wider throughout nature in its entirety: it is about the stress placed on human reason, which organizes the being (“le vivant”) in a vertical anthropocentric axis. It is, moreover, traditional in the medieval tradition; the author assigns him a higher place; man is the “highest creature”, the “dignified animal”. Another semantic unit is also present in this allegory: the microcosm takes the form of a circle long before Leonardo da Vinci drew his famous “Vitruvian man”: “man must have good measures for his arms and long for giving a nice circle”⁷.



⁶ Cf. [Anonymous, 1980, *Placides et Timéo ou Li secrets as philosophes*, § 215-217, pp. 93 ff].

⁷ Cf. [*Placides et Timéo*, § 214, p. 93].

In the XVIth century, the developments become more arborescent because of the Renaissance of the “good letters and disciplines”. So the first chain of similitudes maintains the same systematization of the being (“le vivant”) analogous to man, but in more learned terms: bones for the mineral, plants for the vegetative life, animals for the “sensitive and moving life”, then the “separate intelligences” for the reasonable or intellectual life” and lastly “the big motor” with “the divine and eternal life”.⁸ The commentaries that enrich the topics, also include parts of popular culture: for the vitalist analogy between bones and stones; the locutor, the Curious, in the Premier Curieux of Pontus de Tyard (1557, 1572), quotes as proof the fable of the Giants – which yields in Rabelais’ Pantagruel to a pleasant variant, the eating of the “big apples” letting men grow by the legs to giants [Rabelais, 1994, p. 303].

In the same Pontus' text, the second chain of similitudes between the elements and the body is multiple, referring first to mental faculties (the perceptions to the earth, the imagination to the water; the reason to the air, the understanding to fire, and the intelligence to heaven or to its motor). Then the similitudes go on to extend to the humours and the planets because of their influence. In fact, the new theorization of the “intellectual power” of man allows us to see the addition of a philosophical humanism, since the man-microcosm includes “understanding, apprehension, imagination, memory, will, moods”⁹) and also his multiple realizations (“the discourse of arts, and the certitude of sciences”; the reflection on virtues leads to a Neo-Platonist commentary about the body and soul. The eye, finally “piercing the obscurities of ignorance about things, spreads [...] till to the big eternal and immortal source [...]”, which transforms man into a quasi-divine animal, into the most beautiful and accomplished animal that Nature has created, nourished by the most beautiful Soul”; a man-microcosm who agrees, as the “Copula mundi” with the World “so big, so radiant, so well disposed, so stained also by the Soul”.¹⁰

⁸ [*Ibid.*, p. 133 ; Tyard, 2010 and 2013].

⁹ See [Foucault, 2008].

¹⁰ [Tyard, 2013, p. 141]. « Brief, rien n'est nommé ou réclamé par le grand Monde, qui n'ait quelque exprés adveu en nostre Microcosme ; l'homme le plus beau et accomply animal que Nature cree, nourri de la plus belle Ame ; tout ainsi, que rien n'est si grand, si

This glorious harmonization is not the same for all the authors. Many of them go no further than the analogies between man and animals. The similitude then becomes an heuristical operator with variables. For Pierre Viret, it is used for the self-knowledge, between bestiality and humanity. The Reformer questions the satirical similitudes for metamorphosing man into a morally reformed Subject (in his *Dialogues of the disorder*, 1545¹¹). For Pietro Pomponazzi, man becomes a cosmic “chaméléon”, inverting with fancy the relationships of man, the subject of the world [Pomponazzi, 1930]. At least, this historical study leads, so to speak, to the abolition of the allegory itself because of the epistemological turn of humanism: man becoming the Subject of knowledge (in Maurice Scève’s epic *Microcosm*), a man centered on himself (as shown by da Vinci’s Vitruvian man, the man in his perfect circle).

In short, the similitude is a variable epistemological operator; one of *poiesis* through its aesthetical effects.

When one compares it with the metaphor which works on semantic condensation and lexical shifting, the similitude works on the spacialization of its referents, as the former example of the eye with the stars. The expansion allows us to see non quantifiable but beautiful proportions through their immensity. In effect, the problem is not quantities, but qualities, as underlined precisely by Ramus; for the microcosm, as shared qualities, external to things in their disproportion. The effect of strange beauty results from the light – organic and thinking light on one hand, and on the other, eventually inorganic light. This is also the case for the similitude between dreams and clouds in heaven. Even when it is less about epistemological relationships, they are not less meaningful through the *poïetical* net that similitudes create chaos and non sense. In fact, all these illustrations clearly demonstrate that similitude is a *locus* of dialectical invention

viste, si resplendissant, si bien disposé, que le Monde, soustenu aussi par l’Ame, si ainsi se peut nommer, la plus belle hors de toute comparaison [...]».

¹¹ [Viret, 2012 (1545)].

– in the meaning of the Renaissance – and that this precisely gives a margin to individual interpretations of its true meaning.

These considerations propose that fields of research be opened, eventually on mythology, classical and modern as the new one, created by the Mexican, Miguel Angel Asturias (in *Hombres de maíz*¹²).

Finally, the allegory of man-microcosm plays a role as a turning point from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance; whereas the cosmical roots of man are evident in the Middle Ages, in the Renaissance however, man frees himself out of them and defines himself as a moral and cognitive subject. Nevertheless, the *topos* of the man-microcosm does not disappear totally from the intellectual horizon due to the nostalgia for cosmic roots, and so it reappears in a different form according to the different epistemological contexts over the centuries. Today its resurgence (return) seems more likely in the frame of the sciences of the being; it can be the newest modernity. The analogy, on the other hand, loses its role as epistemological operator during the turn towards quantification and the universal scientific *mathesis* of modernity.

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¹² [Asturias, 2014].

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