OBITUARY

A.-F. Christidis, 1946–2004*

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Epistemological truth has always been the painful imprint resulting from interaction between the social and the historical, and the scholar who does not keep that lifeline alive — both as ideology and as social practice — is nothing but a member of a priesthood which exhausts itself in academic political correctness. — *A.-F. Christidis*

These words come from the last text Anastasios-Fivos Christidis completed and saw through to publication. One might view them as a sort of last will and testament, as they characterize a scholar who envisioned scholarship as more generally connected to life and its social demands, and who envisioned more specifically a critical linguistics embedded in a critical social science. Tassos Christidis was not just a linguist, but a linguist-world citizen, and the profoundly political dimension of his thought was grounded in a vision of universal humanity.

Linguistic theory, history of the Greek language, the oracular tablets from Dodone, language and society: these diverse fields offer a schematic picture of the breadth of his work, and mark Christidis' own journey towards knowledge — a journey which was marked by delight in the quest, and a passionate struggle for synthesis, as his thought moved according to a dialectic that approached the specialized having always as reference-point the generalized. And this was not simply his scholarly method; it was also his ideological stance. Tassos Christidis was opposed to any type of segmentation: he refused to be fixed on the partial, which obscures our view of the whole, and also rejected present day social practices that lead to the fragmentation of the subject. The undertaking was twofold: to connect language with the subject, and by extension to demonstrate the universality of humanity: the enunciation of language of a deeper, humanizing universality, as a demand that aspires to universalize the fragmented subject imposed by the conditions of post-modernity.

It would be fair to say that such a stance towards science and ideas exorcises any form of absolutism. And this would be a fair statement about Christidis'

stance towards the absolute, which would explain his attitude towards the rationalist views on language that have, in his words, resulted in an “abstract, a-historical, sterile form of universality” — in other words, views that have portrayed language as autonomous and self-sufficient, clinically detached from the subject and his or her emotions and desires. In fact, the views that signified the dominance of the digital mind (a fundamental tenet of linguistics) were prevalent when Christidis, resisting these views, was arguing that language is a mixture of the digital and the analogical, lexicalized as *warmth and light*, in Humboldt’s terms. *Light*, because it shapes, decomposes and classifies human experience; *warmth* because beneath the digital surface of language, woven together in a state of tension, seethe emotions and feelings, the passion that colours and marks one’s encounter with the object — the *index* and the *icon*, in Peirce’s terms, a constant source of reference for Christidis. By analysing linguistic elements that had been marginalised by formalist linguistics, such as the metaphor, Christidis brought to light the pre-linguistic and proto-linguistic ‘emotive’ imprints of experience on the digital ‘impassive’ surface of language, claiming that the experiential root of the symbol serves to clarify and complete the boundaries of linguistic signification. Furthermore, in approaching the language of discourses that have not constituted an object of systematic linguistic study, such as magic and prophetic discourse, he highlighted the tacit dialectic that links the peripheral with the central elements of language, opposing the devaluation of the peripheral with its hidden relationship to the centre: “limits delimit”, he would typically say.

Thus, language stretches out like a body bound by an intrinsic internal dialectic of contrasts and delimited by its difference from other systems of signification: language, for example, is the only secondary signification system (according to Pavlov’s distinction) that both distances itself from and at the same time incorporates spaces that connect it with the primary systems. And this view supports an attempt to argue for the continuity of language on two different levels. The first level has to do with the fact that language is a source of freedom from the ‘here and now’ on which nevertheless it is dependent since, to use Peirce’s terms, the symbol bears incorporated within it the mold of its origin, *image* and *icon*. That is to say, secondary signification is not independent of pre-linguistic stages, and language is not detached from its bodily roots. In this sense, language is perceived as a continuum along which the different stages of language acquisition are co-articulated and invested with meaning according to a common logic, while at the same time they are dialectically related to more general changes in human development, promoting a holistic view of the relationship between language and the human subject.

The second level has to do with the symbol, which encodes pre-linguistic experience, as an expression of the interaction between the subject and the object — a view which is consistent with the position that symbolic signification is principally socio-*historical* in character: language should not be perceived — as autonomous linguistics has consistently professed — as the mere expression of historically encoded social conventions because, as a fusion of experiential and cognitive/linguistic elements, it is an expression of the history of the interaction between the subject and the social and physical world. This means that signification is tightly intertwined with history on both the social and the subjective level. In this way, when the subject is introduced into the realm of and produces meanings, those meanings and therefore the construal of subjectivity are inseparably bound up with the historical dimension of language as meaning. In recognizing this bond, the ‘sterile universality’ that rationalist approaches have promoted is immediately questioned in the name of historically determined subjectivity.

Christidis’ endeavour was nourished by intellectual intercourse with important thinkers from various disciplines, not only from outside the dominant linguistic paradigm (with linguists such as Vološinov) but also thinkers beyond the field of linguistics itself: he was interested in philosophy (in Hegel, the idealist; in Nietzsche, the radical critic of the Western tradition; in Bergson, who emphasized the limited scope of discursive thought), in political and social theory (in the Frankfurt School of Critical Thought and Bourdieu’s social critique), in psychology and neuroscience (in Vygotsky, Luria, LeDoux, Damasio and Edelman) and finally in psychoanalysis (in Freud and Lacan). In particular, Christidis’ encounter with psychoanalytical thought proved to be extremely fruitful and the outcome original. In it, he found material with which to enrich the analogical components of language, primarily to ‘infuse warmth’ into the prehistory of language with elements which simultaneously “construct the human psyche and shake it to its very foundations”, as he used to say. Necessity, desire, separation, the vain attempt to return to the primeval cradle where all things were one, where the feelings were still ‘alive’: the original relationship to the mother. At the same time, while psychoanalysis provided him with concepts that enabled him to approach sensitive aspects of metaphor and of poetic discourse, his Peircian tools helped him interpret the unconscious as the realm of an analogical language, which, by using the index and the icon, is organised on the basis of the primary elements of signification. From this standpoint, Christidis was to counter Lacan’s statement that “the unconscious is structured like a language” — a view arrived at by Lacan after his exploration of Saussurean linguistics — with his own proposition that

“the unconscious is structured like a protolanguage”, like a mother ‘tongue’ that seeks unity and resists the division — the analyticity — imposed by the symbol. As a result, psychoanalysis is a talking cure as it transforms the unconscious index into a conscious symbol, which separates, classifies and reshapes dense holistic experience, thus depriving it of its anxiety-arousing power.

The synthesis that Christidis attempted does not extend merely to what we would call a Theory of Language. On the contrary, he used his profound knowledge of the nature of language to approach the history of Greek and to oppose — very often, vehemently — those views that proclaimed Greek as a ‘privileged language’, the creation and proof of a similarly ‘privileged’ people. Language is at the same time one and many, he repeatedly wrote. It is ‘one’ insofar as its homeland is the ‘single human intellect that possesses no country of its own’; but it is not ‘one’ insofar as it is the conjuncture of socio-economic and historical factors that make it different and fashion it into unique cultural products. This epistemological truth assisted him in countering the nationalistic discourses about language and culture that seemed to prevail in Greek reality, as he believed it was essential to deconstruct such views and help one see language in its socio-historical context. For Christidis, foregrounding the historicity of language was not merely an epistemological necessity: it was a moral duty imposed by the dictates of the present, a practical way of resisting the oppressing social practices of modern times. “Historical fate, as human action and human suffering”, he said, “might be illuminated by the history which had engendered it. And this historical illumination has the great virtue of preserving phenomena on a truly human scale, that of the universal human being, who refuses to be sacrificed on the altar of the divisive myths of a watertight, extra-historical, selected particularity.”

With the same kind of commitment to his political ideas, and relying on critical analyses of multilingualism and multiculturalism, he discussed the process of mythologization and the myths attached to contemporary conceptions of these notions. He spoke and wrote about the myth of multilingualism insofar as the latter is promoted through instrumental views of language — views which strip language of its vital functions: i.e. as a cornerstone for the propagation of individuality and for the maintenance of its analogical elements, as well as its role as safe-keeper of the constructive elements of subjectivity. He was also concerned more broadly with the myth of the tolerance of difference and diversity insofar as such tolerance is promoted through a discourse that naturalises a culturally-stripped view of diversity and sterilised, asocial and a-historical view of difference. Such views create the conditions for — and the danger of — a hegemonic form of patronage that ‘subjects or subjugates and

homogenises'. Moreover, this very discourse represents language as a primary cause for difference — a representation glaringly ignorant of the fact that difference is a question that first and foremost concerns the sphere of ideas. It also concerns language, but only secondarily so, and only as 'the ethos of communication closely interrelated with the course of social events'.

Multiculturalism, as an extension of the aforementioned position, is revealed as 'the ideological reflection of the splintering of the universal subject'. Understanding the need to develop a socially and historically-informed cultural or multicultural view of language and of difference, Christidis considered it absolutely essential to articulate a view of a new universalisation of the subject — a view that may be shaped by opposing both the false homogeneity and shallow cosmopolitanism that present day conditions foster: "...these monsters — both drawing on the same reserves of violence — either by sacrificing the particular on the altar of a counterfeit form of the general or the uniform, or by sacrificing the general for the sake of a particularity which is every bit as false".

Tassos Christidis departed on the day following Christmas and, in the words of D.N. Maronitis, "with his death, to each of us there fell a portion". The last to remain from the original group of three, he did not have the chance to put the final touches to the work on which he had been engaged for a quarter of a century, the oracular tablets from Dodone. For twenty-five years, the linguist-archaeologist dug carefully to bring to light the multilingual, multicultural mosaic of antiquity; simultaneously, he listened empathically for the timeless existential agony of humanity emerging from the tablets' inscriptions. Nor did Tassos manage to see in published form the *History of Ancient Greek* which he produced for gymnasium students — a book written with enthusiasm, in a spirit of tenderness for schoolchildren, which demonstrates the pedagogical value of the 'humility of the expert' and "protects from the divisive, socially harmful deification of specialized knowledge, simultaneously cultivating a sense of the ecumenicalism of humanity, both as feeling and demand, on whose foundations were built the great 'moments' of human history". Tassos Christidis' gaze was ever turned towards the universal nature of human pain, towards the 'suffering of the world'...

Note

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A.-F. Christidis also published on the following topics in Greek and foreign journals: classics, epigraphy (Greek, Cypriot, Anatolian), general linguistics, theory of syntax, synchrony-diachrony of the Greek language, sociolinguistics, language policies, language planning. For more information, see: <http://www.greeklanguage.gr/christidis/index.htm>