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The Cipher as the Unity of Signifier and Signified

A great deal has transpired – in philosophy and the life – world – since the publication of two seminal essays by Anna Teresa Tymieniecka : “*Poetica Nova*”¹ and that in which she introduced the concept of the “cipher” as the means by which human the life – world.² My task here is to bring our focus back onto Tymieniecka's central insights, and to show their importance and their relevance to philosophical discourse at the beginning of this new century. I shall work here like a jeweler, placing these pearls of phenomenological acumen into a new setting: the context of the most famous pair of binary oppositions noted by Jacques Derrida for the parallel processes of life and language: the signifier and the signified. This is not, I would like to stress, an attempt to present Tymieniecka as a philosopher with a post-modern attitude or project. Rather, my purpose here is to explain how her views can come to the aid of the post-modern failure to provide a bridge between ontology, aesthetics, and ethics – a bridge for which I feel Tymieniecka has laid the foundations in these two trenchant essays. Serious reflection on Tymieniecka's notions of the cipher and the creative forge will open a new path for a post-modern re-consideration of the problem of the other. Tymieniecka draws on the thought of Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Levinas (among others), while at the same time going beyond them, setting out a completely new and vibrant conception of the fundamental questions of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics.

¹ Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, "Poetica Nova." in A-T. Tymieniecka (ed.), *The Philosophical Reflection of Man in Literature*. Analecta Husserliana, vol. XII (Dordrecht/Boston/London: D. Reidel. 1982), pp. 1-93. (Herein parenthetically referenced as PN.)

² Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, "The Creative Self and the Other in Man's Self-Interpretation," in A-T. Tymieniecka (ed.), *The Self and the Other: The Irreducible Element in Man*, Part I (Dordrecht/Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 151-186. (Herein parenthetically referenced as CSO.)

I. The Cipher: the Existential and Creative Inscription of the Self in the World

Within the structural framework of the concept of *ontopoeisis*, we find Tymieniecka arguing for a more active understanding of the phenomena of human being than Husserl was prepared to acknowledge. What leads up to emergence into the world (*phainomena*), she says, is not passive in any sense. Rather, as a demonstration of intentionality, will, and agency, self-interpretation serves both to constitute and construct the self, through a series of decisions over against otherness. Tymieniecka goes so far as to assert that the self is "given" (as part of the data of the life-world) only in potentiality. One can only be defined as *human* if one has moved beyond the basic levels of individual and even of person, onto the level of the creative self, which creates itself by establishing its meaningfulness within the life-world.

This creative agency accomplishes two essential tasks. First, it serves to break our bondage to Nature, by establishing the self as not merely 'given' but as self-projective into the realm of the given. By "infusing with ... personal experience" the otherwise empty data of the life-world, the human being creates meaning. In the other direction, creative self-explication takes place in the context of the conscious other. I am a self precisely because I am not an anonymous agent, precisely because of the meaning which I have for others. By choosing to insert myself into the spectrum of human patterns of meaning, I create myself as not merely a passive carrier of meaning, but an engineer of meaning. As I move through the "common territory of mutual relevance," I inscribe myself both into otherness and onto the other. I write myself into my life. (CSO, 164)

But the fragmentary nature of my life is not a source of nihilistic despair, as it is for Derrida and some of the other post-modern thinkers. In Tymieniecka's schema I accept myself as a fragment; this fact does not preclude the possibility of meaningfulness. In part, the limitations of the life-world demand such acceptance; so too, the fact that I may only choose to actualize one from a spectrum of possible permutations in any given situation. Yet I am not **only** a fragment. Each decision is another thread in the weaving of 'the web of meaning' which I and the others in my life-world are constantly fashioning. That is, I cannot become a self alone. The self and the other are correlative poles of alterity, "and yet, his alterity is not a hindrance; it is the essential touchstone of my own most

intimate search after a meaning to give to himself" (CSO, 165). In this construction, Tymieniecka goes beyond even Levinas' radical interpretation of an ethics based on encountering the other, whereby my subjectivity is only established if and as I subject myself to the other.³ Tymieniecka asserts that finding the other establishes me **ontologically**.

I. as the self which seeks to discover and establish my own sameness within a pattern of existence, become 'myself.' that is. 'a person,' only insofar as I find this pattern together with an other. He himself must leave within my emerging personal *schema* the anonymity of a real individual and enter into it through my discovery of *his own* sameness. (CSO. 165)

By interpreting the other, therefore, I find the key to myself. This phenomenon, then, is not 'merely' the foundation for a hermeneutic of human being (which it also is – as Heidegger would agree), or even for an ethics, but for an ontology. Entering into the world of the other I constitute and construct myself as both a point and an instrument of interpretation, in the creative analysis of the life-world. If we view life as a creative process of self-explication, we begin to see the human as

a text, that is, a unified pattern of consistent meanings, reposing 'immanently' within itself. This meaningful pattern plays ... the role of a watershed between the Initial Spontaneity [of being] and our interpretation of it through our own being, or of a canvas which ... serves us as the medium upon which we will ourselves embroider a new texture of ... transfiguration. (CSO, 169ff.)

We will get back to the idea of the self as text presently. The creative analysis of this existential text which we are is an interrogation into the phenomena of our human being, an inquiry into the phenomena of what lies between: between self and other, between what is given and what is made, and ultimately between what is and what is known. To get to the cipher we must stretch ourselves in several directions at once. We must work our way out to the outermost edges of what can be known of the life-world. At the same time, we must find our way back to the origins of the self. Yet too, at the same time we must inquire into the other, in

³ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas. *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. 1985), pp. 83-101.

order to find the self, and into art, to see what might be revealed there. And all the while, we are still confronted by the question of meaning. Yet even as we try to get 'to' the cipher, it is the cipher itself that makes this project feasible. For we cannot hope to crack the code of meaning without some key. And Tymieniecka affirms that it is in developing the cipher that the creative self comes into being. For in the end, she says, we have no meaning except the meaning which we make ourselves, and *by means of which we make ourselves* - and one another. The challenge of the cipher is to decode the message embedded within us, and so bring it and ourselves into being.

The message has both a creator and a recipient - and here Tymieniecka moves us onto a new plane. Turning to art, she says, "... the ciphering of the work of art which gives 'body' to the vision with its message is necessarily the self-explication of *man in his new, creative specifically human self*" (CSO. 181). Ciphering is "a deliberate selection of forms and means" by which the self moves from an individual inscription into the script of the dialogue that then takes place with the other, the recipient of the message. Creative self-explication, therefore, is **essentially** communication. As such, it is essentially interminable, never completed, constantly unfolding, being constructed, creating something new through the endless process of interpretation.

II. The Creative Forge

Tymieniecka ends her 1977 essay with a question: "What are the conditions which would have to be fulfilled to enable us to reach its unifying cipher?" (i.e., the unification of self and other). Her 1982 essay *Poetica Nova* seeks to provide an answer to this question via a deeper examination of the creative process, specifically the creation of literature. She seeks in this essay to correct what she perceives as a misunderstanding between philosophy and literature. Somewhere along the line (probably in the development of rationalism), philosophy has taken over the discussion of the fundamental questions of meaning. Literature is posited now as perhaps the handmaid of philosophy, but little more. Tymieniecka holds fast to the conviction that, just as the self cannot 'find' itself without the other, but rather creates its meaning through communication with the other, so the two disciplines of philosophy and literature cannot find the 'answers' to the fundamental questions on their own: each needs the counterbalance of the other. For life, Tymieniecka asserts, is not merely a matter of the subject's working-through of the

facts and events of the life-world. Human life is not constituted merely by phenomena, but more importantly by interpretation of phenomena: the assignation of significance. This is a creative process, and we can learn much about the process of creation by examining works of literary art.

The rational and creative faculties must work hand in hand on this endeavor. We must, she says, 'go deeper than the intellect to find meaning,' to what she calls the 'subterranean' level. Intellectual inquiry is merely the first step; we need to advance to the level of the emotions and impulses which drive us, where our genetic constitution begins to elucidate for us our place in the life-world. Both the intellect and the imagination deal with the same phenomena, both are inextricably intertwined in the 'knot' of meaning-seeking. Thus, she says, literary work is generative; like the cipher, it exists to make sense of and then add the self to life experience, and then to transform the world by means of one's contribution to it.

The inquiry of the creative process demands a movement of deepening and broadening. One is constantly going down to the elemental and genetic level of meaning, up to the surface of communication with others, and then back down to meaning within and for and of the self. The nature of the process reflects its polyvalent task: to 'retrieve significance and give it expression' between the self and the other, and even Tymieniecka hints, to communication with the real. It is the cipher which performs this function, plunging down to the elemental origins and resurfacing in the work of art. The cipher is "the crucial intermediary" between the pre-conscious and the semantic.

The examination of phenomena in search of meaning falls into three types. First, one that is a reflection on the self alone: a critical analysis of the consequences of one's actions. Such an examination, Tymieniecka warns, can only go so far; it is limited to the concrete. A deeper inquiry can be made into what is given, in reflection on the lived world as shared with others. Both types are precipitated by crisis: we are generally so preoccupied with the present moment that we do not bother to inquire into meaning until existence is put in question. Both types of examination can serve to carry us forward: in looking at the present consequences of our actions or in reflecting on the life-world, we can plan for the future. We can, in this way, come to some operational understanding of the world, but only to a limited understanding of its significance, or our own.

A third type of examination, a 'radical examination' that looks backward to the genesis of events, proves equally unsatisfactory to the discovery of

meaning, since we can never determine which link in a chain of events was 'the' decisive one; all are overdetermined. saturated with the possibility of endless interpretation but no certain knowledge about the present. The past is overdetermined, the future is merely presumptive. Therefore, if we are looking for certainty we would do better to base knowledge of significance on a phenomenological analysis of the present the feelings that have been evoked in us. For the question remains: how can we locate the interpretation that will lead to understanding of significance? How can we discover the sought-after meaning of the Real?

To move towards a philosophical answer, Tymieniecka turns to literature, and specifically to a study of the three types of poetry: epic, dramatic, and lyric. Epic poetry, she outlines, explores three levels, or 'knots' of significance: 1) the struggle with 'the Elements' [Nature, givenness] to survive; 2) the constant devising of strategies to attain and maintain dominance; and 3) the interpretation of the individual within the context of the whole. Like the analysis of consequences, however, this type of poetry provides only a partial glimpse into signification. Dramatic poetry, because it offers a chance for concrete engagement with the re-enacted event, shines a special light into the heart of significance, "no other form of art, indeed, exposes the hidden springs of human existence more deeply and more clearly" (*Poetica Nova*, 57). But although it helps us to experience an event, drama does not elevate the event which occurs outside of ourselves "to the level of universal human significance" (*PN*, 58). For this, she says, you need pure poetry: lyrical poetry.

"The lyric is situated at the crossroads of all possible interpretation" (*PN*, 60). It is, somehow, above and beyond the personal, in the lyric poem. Tymieniecka says (following Holderlin), we hear the language of feeling itself. Thus we are elevated beyond the "merely" personal, into the universal. The "lyrical moment" has three essential features:

- 1) the profound emotional "life" running through it to which any expression is accidental;
- 2) the unique unity of the emotion which constitutes this "profound life"; and
- 3) its position between the "elevation" of the spirit and the real life, between the "heroic" and the naive.
between its concrete lived substance and its ideal universal orientation. (*PN*, 61)

There is far more to the lyric poem than can be contained in human rules of language. Because the lyrical moment lies **in the between**. It exists both within the creative self and beyond it. It is the threshold between the personal and the universal, between what is willed and what is given. Thus it remains, at least in part, indefinable. And precisely because of its indefinability, it breaks into our, generally accepted ideas of order. Existentially, "... the onset of the lyrical outbreak is beyond poetic calculation: it breaks out from the abysses of the human *subliminal* realm" (PN, 89).

The lyrical moment is what Tymieniecka calls 'the creative forge'. "It is the lyrical moment that gives poetry its ineffable quality and endows it with an all-pervading mysterious attraction and power" (PN, 61). It is independent from any direct life-meaningfulness; rather, its meaning and its significance reside in the universal. It 'urges us... to seek its appropriate cipher for its significant communication" (PN, 63).

The 'origin of expression as such' lies forever hidden in mystery, beyond all basis in theory. But like sap flowing through living trees, lyric poetry can teach us what currents are coursing through our veins:

This life-growth process through which the lyrical streamlet flows is that of the human existence in its quest after creative fulfillment and its striving toward the *ultimate telos*. ... The lyrical cadences ... lift the human life to a higher and authentically human level of **his** *existential experience of himself* and find their most condensed and strong outlet in the poetic creativity; they surge from the *subliminal ground of the INITIAL SPONTANEITY from the resources of which the human being generates his life and existence*. (PN, 63fT.)

The creative forge is that point where the human is lifted out of self into the work of art, and so **creates both** self and art, as fully alive and meaningful. In this interpretation, creator and what is created are valued equally, as mutually interdependent. Thus, for Tymieniecka, poetics goes far beyond interpretation, or 'synthesis.' as Ingarden would aver. Tymieniecka reproaches Ingarden for going too far in his conception of the meaning of poetics. Ingarden, she says, overemphasizes the human element and effort, stressing *poesis* and the conditions of its making, and disregarding "the crucial question of content and form" (PN. 69). For Tymieniecka wants to maintain as the **crux** of the matter the correlation between the ontological and the cognitive aspects of literature. The creative forge of human consciousness is the link between the abstract and the concrete, the means by which **the human too** is

forged: as cognizing, creating meaning, creating the work of art, and creating the self.

Poetica Nova, Tymieniecka suggests is "the metaphysics of the human condition" (PN, 72). Her question, she says, was to discover how the human "constructs himself from the material of the subliminal spontaneities by means of his own initiatives" (PN, 73). This occurs in a creative process that points both out and in: the urge to create is both an urge **to find** meaning (for oneself) and **to show** (to the other). Thus, creativity, meaning, and significance are essentially about communication.

They are also essentially about individual uniqueness. The creative self is primarily an agent, a for-itself, with a three-fold intention. First, to seek after "the truth of things." Second, to display "its new form of expression within the life-world as a challenge to its present forms" (PN, 73). And finally, to bring both these "orientations back to their source in the natural subject, which consists of the urge to accomplish this quest *oneself*, giving it a communicable expression." The *telos* of human being, in this understanding, is not simply to find personal meaning or to understand being as such, but both. In the creative activity of interpretation, meaning is both borne by and bears the subject. Art is "the *telos* of the creative process through which this unique type of human beingness emerges and is established: its existence-significance" (PN, 75). Through the cipher, human being is enacted.

III. Signifier and Signified Brought Together in the Creative Forge

Like Tymieniecka, Jacques Derrida has long been concerned with the problem of meaning. I would like now to turn our attention briefly to a consideration of Derrida's ideas of the opposition between signifier and signified, and demonstrate how Tymieniecka's concepts may help untie Derrida's existential 'knot'. Like Derrida, Tymieniecka has frequently referred to the human being as a text. In "The Creative Self and the Other," she goes so far as to suggest that the patterns in human life must undergo deconstruction through phenomenological inquiry:

We aim to uncover neither a shell of one rational, meaningful structure, nor its components, but the *ideogram* composed of a cluster of relevant emotive associations, capable to reverberate

through the labyrinth of our functions, that is, the "cipher."
(CSO, 171)

The universal longing and search for meaning which Tymieniecka calls "ciphering" is a means of determining oneself as real, as significant, as defining in the world. While she goes well beyond Husserl's original theory of meaning, it would seem difficult for her to find common ground with Derrida in this area.⁴ But I would like to argue that upon the concepts of the cipher and the creative forge new bridges of understanding may be built. For example, in *Poetica Nora* Tymieniecka roundly criticizes Heidegger (among others) for trying to impose any superstructure of meaning onto the experience of human being:

No monistic approach tying up all the strings of human discourse within one metaphysical principle, no absolutism of a transcendental network of intentional structuration, nor that of an ontological realism fixating the dynamic currents of life-genesis into sclerosed and artificial constructs of human intellect can even approach this existentially differentiated contractive progress. (PN, 77)

In fact, Tymieniecka avers, it is the very uniqueness of the meaning that renders it meaningful. Thus, Tymieniecka is much closer to Derrida's critique of absolutism than might seem possible at first glance. For Derrida, the problem of Western metaphysics is that, made anxious by the lack of a central organizing principle, human nature constantly seeks to fill the center by constructing new centers, new fixed meanings. Tymieniecka's view of the creative forge is that the very task of the human is for each one to construct a meaning for him/herself, and, indeed, a meaning that is constantly changing as interpretation grows and develops. The open, fluid nature of the lyrical moment is essentially always already decentered, and yet full of meaning nonetheless.

As is well known, in Derrida's theory, the world is constructed in sets of binary opposites, each struggling to achieve the dominance of a central position, and against marginalization, striving for actualization and identity. In each case, what is **present** is privileged over what is **absent**. In the realm of language, in Derrida's classic formulation of the binary

⁴ Derrida's earliest essay, "La voix et le phenomene" (1967), was a direct attack on Husserl's theory of meaning, as set out in the *Logical Investigations* (1900-01).

opposition of signifier to signified, the signified is internal, and the signifier external. The only way that the signifier gains identity is in its difference from other signifiers. This is a superficial, second-order difference, however; not a difference on the level of significance or meaning. For "on the level of meaning, the signified has no meaning in-and-of-itself."⁵ The signified is one link in an endless chain. "In fact, each potential meaning turns out to be just another sound, searching for yet another potential meaning. You never reach meaning [itself]."⁶ It is the **play of differences** which establishes meanings. So if there is to be any meaning at all, this must be found inside the signifier, not in the outer manifestations of the signified.

Such an understanding echoes through Tymieniecka's writings on the cipher and the creative forge. I argue that Derrida and Tymieniecka have a point of intersection that has not been articulated. For the binary opposition of signifier and signified is overcome "in the cipher, where the dual urge of the creative self to find meaning and then to show it to the other establishes the primary drive of communication at the heart, not only of language, but of life. As the creative self unfolds its intention in the world, it establishes its agency and seeks its truth (as one might say of the signifier), all the while presenting a new form of expression (a new signified) which challenges the existing forms. The dynamism of the cipher breaks through the tension of the binary opposites. Thus,

... following the creative process of man it becomes clear that it is the real individual being who through his *vital-existential generalire progress in its differentiations* functions as the crucial factor of order. (PN. 77)

By creating order, the individual clears a space for the creation of something new. In the potent play of differences, the creative self both establishes its identity and produces the expression of its existential significance.

It is possible, however, that Derrida may have inadvertently led us towards an understanding of the question that Tymieniecka posed at the end of her 1977 essay, as I will conclude by demonstrating.

⁵ James Powell, *Discovering Derrida* (New York: Dimensions. 1996). p. 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

IV. Poetica Nova

It is appropriate to end with the question of the title of the essay which has been at the core of my talk today: what is the meaning of '*poetica nova*'? This is not merely a new conception of poetics. Rather, it is **the poetics of the new**, the poetics of literary and existential creation which is at issue here, the poetics whereby what is created becomes meaningful and gives meaning, and simultaneously brings its human creator into full existence and significance.

The existence-significance of the work lies in its communicative power: as catalyst for the creation of the new, the interpreted meaning given in the creative forge, by the creative self, acting to construct the cipher, and for the recipient who simultaneously *acts* (as an interpretive agent). Here, literature and phenomenology join forces, and from their interpretive dialogue, the *novum* emerges.

"Communication" as a bilateral interpretation is then the *novum* which the creative function introduces into man's self-unfolding. ... (CSO, 176)

The unique significance of each human is inscribed in the text of his or her own life. In the creative forge, each one fashions the cipher which is then branded onto the world: here is my mark. This is a process that continues as long as life itself, and beyond, for as each one's significance is made present in the world, the world is changed forever. Thus, there is no answer to Tymieniecka's question. "What are the conditions which would have to be fulfilled to enable us to reach its unifying cipher?" (i.e., the unification of self and other). No such conditions can ever be fulfilled. For the creative self, in the endless play of developing its dual nature as signifier and signified, can never come to rest in the other. Its creative work is never done. The poetics of the new go on. ...

The existential significance *ciphered* within the creative forge is the root of the *recreative* deciphering of the literary work of art. It is also the root of the *specifically human existence*. With the effort of a demiurgos, freeing himself from pre-given laws and aims, *man-the-creator* orchestrates his inherited forces into new channels and ciphers them into an ever novel life-significant system. (PN, 82)