

Beata Stawarska, *Saussure's Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology. Undoing the Doctrine of the Course in General Linguistics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 304 pp.

Beata Stawarska's book is as important as its title may seem strange to the reader. Indeed, what on earth does Ferdinand de Saussure have to do with phenomenology? The author's claim of «a phenomenological stance adopted by the <founding father of structuralism>» looks set to «strik[e] one as an aberration and a scandal» (p. 180). Is it not true that Ferdinand de Saussure is the official founder of the structuralist movement in linguistics and, more generally, the human sciences? Is it not true that structural analysis is opposed to phenomenological description and that Saussurean structuralism must therefore lie on the opposite end of the spectrum from the tradition of phenomenology? Such claims seem to be nothing more than expected *truisms*, namely something that «goes without saying», something even «too obvious for mention» (p. 1). Nevertheless, a truism can also be paradoxically untrue. This book represents exactly an engagement with the mentioned intertwined truisms. In fact, as the author writes in the introduction, the aim of the book is to look back

to the official sources of the structuralist movement in Saussure's linguistics, to reexamine them in light of the scholarly contributions of the last five decades which challenge the received structuralist view of Saussure, and, finally, to expose a phenomenological current in his own work (p. 2).

The ultimate purpose of the book lies then in «suspending the institutionalized antagonism» between phenomenology and structuralism, questioning some common historiographical categories and academic divisions and «enabling a renewed *rapprochement* between structure and subject based approaches to language and experience» (p. 2). Stawarska's endeavour is thus consistent with a line of research that can be basically traced back to two pioneering works published by Elmar Holenstein in the 1970s (Holenstein 1975, 1976) and that has recently regained its vigour (see for instance Aurora: 2014, 2015a, 2015b, Dennes: 1997, Flack: 2011, 2013, Piana: 2013, Sonesson: 2012). The main thesis underpinning this line of research is that phenomenology and structuralism emerged as pan-European and interdisciplinary approaches and, far from representing conflicting or alternative schools, developed within a wide and complex network of mutual influences at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this respect, Stawarska's book is certainly set to play a fundamental role.

The book is divided into three parts and two appendices. In the first part, ««Saussurean doctrine» and its discontents», the author draws on material from the *Nachlass* to reexamine the host of well-known dichotomies associated with Saussure's general linguistics and later adopted by structuralism. Stawarska clearly shows that the editorial rendering of the source materials, accomplished by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Alber Riedlinger, offered an oversimplified version of Saussure's linguistic insights, forcing the refined philosophy of language set in motion by the Swiss linguist into a series of strict dichotomies (signifier-signified, langue-parole, synchrony-diachrony) hierarchically ordered and serving to define language as a close and self-sufficient semiological system. By turning to the source materials, so Stawarska suggests, one can instead appreciate the philosophical complexity of Saussure's argument. Indeed, contrary to the received structuralist view, according to the Saussure of the source materials «language is not an autonomous and closed system where like only mixes with like; it is», rather, «consistently tied to, constrained, and sustained, by the world – *the social world*» (p. 25). Drawing on Foucault's reflection on the author function, Stawarska goes so far as to distinguish, under the name of Saussure, two really different authors, namely Saussure-the-author-of-the-*Course*, on the one hand, and the Saussure of the source materials, on the other hand. It is striking to notice that, following Stawarska's reconstruction, one can find

in Saussure's manuscripts many of the criticisms later directed by the so-called post-structuralists to structuralism and, more specifically, to Saussure-the-author-of-the-*Course*. This is certainly the case of Derrida's criticisms in «Of Grammatology» (see chapter 2, «Phonocentrism: Derrida»), but the same applies to Deleuze and Guattari's attacks in «A Thousand Plateaus» (See Aurora: forthcoming 2016).

The second part, ««general linguistics: science and/or philosophy of language», is certainly the most interesting one, at least from an epistemological and philosophical point of view. Indeed, it «looks to Saussure's *Nachlass* for a philosophical reflection on language study, with an emphasis on its phenomenological orientation». According to Stawarska, Saussure would share with other influent scholars of his time, like Max Wertheimer, Max Weber and, most significantly, Edmund Husserl, a critique of the positivistic reduction of (human) sciences to a mere factual pursuit. Indeed,

the source materials develop a similar critique of the sciences dealing with human matters like language as if it were a directly available natural fact and develop an alternative approach which reflects back on the subject's involvement in the matter under investigation, both in the every day context of language use and within language study (p. 112).

«Saussure's preferred attitude», so the author claims,

is therefore phenomenological in that it approaches language the way it is (already) given to us in experience and usage, and models its method on this prereflective manifestation of meaning to the speaker rather than on ideals of metaphysically construed objectivity posited by the scientist» (p. 118-119).

The author explores thus the idea of a *linguistic phenomenology* drawing on, besides Saussure, the philosophical insights of Hegel, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. If the references to the works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty turn out to be completely appropriate and fitting, this reader is not convinced of the need for a referral to Hegel's phenomenology. Stawarska's analysis of Hegel's work seems to be too summary and misses the key features of Hegel's philosophical project. Indeed, I believe that, beyond the wording, Hegel's phenomenology has nothing to do with twentieth-century phenomenology. The references to Merleau-Ponty and Husserl are, instead, very useful and productive and serve to demonstrate that, despite ordinary presentations of phenomenology,

a phenomenology of language, even in Husserl's own project, does not fit into a model of subjective constitution of meaning, and that there is room for a structural analysis of language itself, according to its guiding principles and rules

within a phenomenological conception of language [...] Husserl's analysis provides an exemplar of working at the intersection of subjective and systemic understanding of meaning and language, and as such is instructive to the project of linguistic phenomenology (p. 172).

The third part, «The Inception and the reception of the <Saussurean doctrine>», provides «an account of the material and institutional history that led to the production and reception of the *Course* as a statement of the basic dichotomies» (p. 19), namely as the *Great book* of structuralism. So, in constant dialogue with the most recent scholarship, the author firmly unmasks one by one, with philological rigour and remarkable sharpness, the many illicit interpolations and alterations accomplished by the editors like, for instance, the reversal of the order of presentation of Saussure's investigations from the manuscripts to the *Course*. «Bally and Sechehaye», Stawarska writes,

played a double role in the process of establishing the familiar set of dichotomies [...] they publicly presented and ghostwrote [the] basic principles *into* the text of the *course*, and subsequently received the same principles *from* the *Course* as Saussure's own word [...] The editors

thus combined forces to write their creations into the *Course*, and to obscure their role by adopting a stance of a respectable pupil receiving the master's teaching (p. 216-217).

Two brief appendices conclude the book. In the first, «English translations of the course», the author comments on how the two English-language editions and translations of the *Course* deploy various strategies to legitimize the book as the *Great book* of structuralism; in the second, «Saussure's silence», the author explores Saussure's reticence to publish in the academic format, despite the thousands of manuscript pages which testify of a «secret and difficult becoming of a *philosopher*» (p. 265). Such a philosopher, so Stawarska maintains, «would have ever written a programmatic statement of general linguistics comparable to the *Course*» (p. 265).

With its combination of philological rigour, historical accuracy and philosophical brightness, Stawarska's book is bound to become a text of great import, at least under three points of view: 1. It fosters a new dialogue between philosophy and linguistics, offering in addition the idea of a linguistic phenomenology to scholarship; 2. It provides another fundamental piece in the puzzle of rewriting the history of structuralism and phenomenology and of their mutual influences; 3. It contributes to freeing the philosophical debate from old and often unjustified dichotomies, most notably the dichotomy between structure and subjectivity, however

conceived, and therefore the dichotomy between structuralism and phenomenology.

Having said that, this reader has just another concern, besides the one regarding the pertinence of referring to Hegel: maybe the author could have better explained the nature of the relation between classical, «orthodox» structuralism and the idea of a «phenomenological structuralism»; otherwise, one could simply think that Saussure, far from being the founding father of structuralism, needs to be considered as a phenomenologist. If that is the case, the book would fail to call attention to the complex web of mutual theoretical and historical influences between phenomenology and structuralism, simply moving Saussure from the field of structuralism to that of phenomenology. I believe that this is not the case, but the author's sometime too radical refusal of Saussure's structuralism, may cause the reader to lose the gist of the book, that lies in the «enabling [of] a renewed *rapprochement* between structure and subject based approaches to language and experience» (p. 2).

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