

Book reviews

Anna Lisa Tota, *Eco-Words. The Ecology of Conversation*. New York: Routledge, 2024, pp. 158, £ 31.99

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Anna Lisa Tota's volume, *Eco-Words. The Ecology of Conversation*, offers a perspective, or rather, a multisensory perception that penetrates the different layers of natural, social, and individual reality. It captures the subtle complexity of tacit correspondences, interrelations, and references of meaning. The multiplicity of perspectives and levels of analysis in this volume corresponds to an approach that reveals the permeability of distinctions and the inadequacy of rigid and unidimensional categorizations in the critical understanding of both objective and subjective reality.

It is challenging to categorize the volume into a single genre: it can be considered a scientific essay, but with a narrative effectiveness that aligns it with a meditative text and sometimes with autobiographical storytelling. The experiential perspective, evident in the straightforward style and the rhythmic pace of the narrative – akin to the often-characteristic language of spirituality – explores various philosophical, cultural, and religious traditions: from Taoism to the mystical syncretism of Gurdjieff's citations that run through the book as a Leitmotiv, to Christian spirituality. Notably, the book opens with a reference to the baptismal rite, emphasizing the vital connection between uttered and listened-to words, which act sacramentally, and the name-word that expresses the individuals' irreducible identity but also their relationality, as the attribution of the name marks entry into the community. It appears to resonate, on many pages of the volume, the echo of the Johannine Prologue, in which the Word becomes embodied and inhabits a relationship of communion, «The Word became flesh and dwelt among us» – almost like the matrix of every eco-word. The eco-words analysed, evoked, and "hoped for" by Tota are, in fact, a response to the reified and reifying words of disenchantment that mark the loss of living, active, embodied language. On a theoretical level, this implies a critique of the rationalist approach stemming from the Cartesian matrix and its dualism that separates the mind from the body, an operation that directly involves the separation of the logos sphere – as rationality with its privileged channel in verbal language – from the body, emotions, and the complex multidimensionality of experience. The eco-words emerge as words capable of recomposing this fracture that extends across much of history of Western thought but also characterizes social practices and daily interactions that undermine the authenticity of experience and relationships. The result is a critique of interpersonal communication that extends to the original vices of logical positivism in terms of reductionism and reification of experience.

In their being embodied, eco-words maintain a close connection with the physical world. The dialogue with the reader itself is conceived as a communicative flow in which words resonate, as in the energetics of Ernst Kurth, and are inserted into the energetic flows of space and time from which their performativity and eventfulness derive. Quantum physics serves as inspiration for a reading of

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interconnection and, therefore, possible communication between every living being, but also between past, present, and future. Subjectivity extensions are closely linked to temporal structures that unite quantum physics with the dimensions of the unconscious and memory. The reference to psychoanalysis is also strong – especially when it comes to the experience of trauma – yet the author does not seem to consider it as a unique solution. Instead, it is sought in the inner disposition of individuals, in their *decision* to interpret, speak, and think about reality, even the past, in a toxic, "polluting" way or, rather, in an *ecological* way, in the light of an almost coincidence between processes of meaning attribution and the exercise of free will: «Giving meaning is a potentially revolutionary act in itself, as it fully expresses the sense of our free will» (p. 7). In this direction, the author's statement of intent is also an exhortation and an invitation to readers to consider the scope and effects of the chosen words, the words uttered, and their transformative impact: «this book encourages the reader to return (at least partially) to a conception of words as powerful, in which saying may not entirely equate to doing, but would nonetheless constitute a strong and valid premise, and frame, for the ensuing action. In this light, words do a lot. Perhaps not as much as actions, but rather than seeing them as less intense, I would suggest we see them as a different way of doing things» (p. 37).

Without ever providing a univocal – inevitably reductive – definition of Eco-words, Tota introduces and composes this concept through a constellation of recurring terms and expressions such as "experience," "actions," "emotions," "resonance," "body language," and "deep feelings." «*Eco-words* are words that rebuild the silent but vivid connection between our subjectivity and the knowledge of the world. Eco-words are alive, vital, nourishing; they produce happiness and well-being wherever they are present. They have the capacity to create deep understanding and produce well-being in the person speaking and in the one listening at the same time» (p. XVI). This is not therefore “merely” a cultural or theoretical matter. The author indeed defines her work as a militant book, something intended to contribute to the transformation and improvement of reality. Active words, eco-words are necessary, because they are capable of making the past, as well as conversations and relationships with oneself and others, more *sustainable*. Tota's analysis, with an intellectual operation somewhat analogous to Goffman's situational approach, though with different theoretical premises and outcomes, reveals latent structures and effects of everyday interactions and common sense. Through a multitude of episodes and situations drawn from personal and familial memory, Tota traces in verbal and body language, in its expressions as well as in its pauses and silences, the emotional matrices and resulting behavioural responses. Perhaps it is precisely at this point that the volume, in line with its programmatic intent, goes beyond mere argumentation and analysis. Instead, it manifests in the active concreteness of this retrieval of memories that find expression and assume new meaning and understanding through the eco-words the book not only talks about but intends to be composed of.