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Hans Blumenberg. The Readability of the World

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Hans Blumenberg. *The Readability of the World*. Trans. Robert Savage and David Roberts. Cornell University Press 2022. 406 pp. \$44.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781501766619).

Robert Savage, translator of Blumenberg's *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, and David Roberts have skillfully brought Hans Blumenberg's study of the idea that the world is something 'readable' to an English readership, through Cornell University Press's signal|transfer series. *The Readability of the World* (originally published in 1981 as *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*) is a later work of Blumenberg, though its development began decades earlier and in reference to the midcentury research of the literary scholar Ernst Robert Curtius and the conceptual historian Erich Rothacker. Curtius had included a chapter on the idea of the book of nature in his widely read *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948), Rothacker had hinted at a work in progress on the topic, although it was only published posthumously, and that only from heavily edited notes made by Rothacker over the years. Blumenberg gives his account of this indebtedness in his introduction (4-7); it appears that while the metaphor of the book of nature had been a topic of interest for some time, he deferred on writing about it at length until it was clear that a full work would not be published by Rothacker. Blumenberg saw *The Readability of the World* as a more exhaustive and substantiated study of the significance of the metaphor of 'reading' the world than his predecessors had offered, although even in *The Readability of the World*, Blumenberg is thorough but deals with exemplars and anecdotes.

Blumenberg is concerned with reading as an organizing paradigm for 'the metaphors of our capacity to experience the world.' (7) In other words, the significance of using the metaphor of reading to describe our engagement with the world is the fact that it employs a hermeneutical form. Experience of a world is not merely empirical reception; it requires decoding, interpreting, and even linguistic mediation.

While earlier approaches to the reading metaphor focused on the extent to which it was grounded in a Christian biblical tradition and later expanded its coverage to a book of nature, Blumenberg sees the biblical metaphor as part of, but not dominant for, the metaphorology of readability. The original great book was a more general and idealized 'book of life' that offered judgment, oracles, and prophecy concerning the reality of human life. At a much later point the



book of life developed, via the Augustinian concept of *memoria*, into a ‘book of history.’ Originally, though, the readability of human fates in ancient religious traditions were set *against* mere nature, with which we now more readily associate the readability metaphor (in the idea of a ‘book of nature’). ‘Overshadowed by their messages,’ Blumenberg writes, ‘nature becomes the mere stage on which the deeds and misdeeds found worthy of record are first performed. There is nothing to be read in it. Here, a ‘book of nature’ would have to be what it nonetheless was not allowed to be: an antibook.’ (24) Blumenberg makes an original argument here that the book of nature first came to prominence amidst anti-gnostic polemics in late antiquity that led to an embrace by Christianity of nature and the cosmos, rendering them ‘readable’ in a way that they had not been before.

While Platonism itself, and ancient Greek philosophy more generally, were not fertile ground for the book metaphor because cosmology was not framed in terms of decipherability (13-14), it was Platonic and anti-Aristotelian commitments that further strengthened the status of the book of nature in the age of Galileo and Kepler. (58-59) The language of their book was mathematics, and its page count, in a disconcerting shift from previous centuries where knowledge of the world was understood to be circumscribed and aligned with the divine truth of revelation, was indeterminate. A previous commitment to the idea that ‘God’s books agree with each other’ (63) faced pressure from new scientific discovery as well as from critical approaches to scripture.

Blumenberg charts the subsequent proliferation of the metaphors of reading through some of its most significant modern developments. Chapter IX discusses the 17th century Spanish writer Baltasar Gracián’s idea of decryption of the world through the experiences of a lifelong journey in his novel *El Criticón*, which was taken up two centuries later by Schopenhauer to critique the system building of more celebrated philosophers contemporary to him, from the position of a sort of worldly wisdom that faces the cryptic nature of the world. By Schopenhauer’s century the readability of the world was understood fully in terms of a book of human history, but this development was not a foregone conclusion, and moved through the French encyclopedists and the fragmentary genre of the Romantics to its fully historicized form.

The encyclopedia sought to be a universal library, but was also a competitor to the book of

nature insofar as both sought to digest the totality of the truths of the universe. In seeking totality, the encyclopedia looked back to earlier models of complete codification. What Goethe, Herder, Novalis, and others would question about the French encyclopedic tradition would be this lack of openness to future creation. Looking forward, however, the encyclopedia began to entangle human and natural histories in a way that would come to fuller fruition in the novel, and the poetic and philosophical fragment. Although Goethe and von Humboldt could still entertain pretensions of a ‘novel of the universe’ or a ‘comprehensive account of nature,’ (185) this was the last generation for whom totality seemed to be a possibility. Even if achievable, a total account would still raise questions about its audience: ‘If the meaning of the world is to find expression, who is there for it to impress in the form of its perfected readability?’ (270) The aesthetic responsibility of the author and reader, the extent to which emptiness better conveyed the content of the world-book, and new methods of writing this book in the absence of certainty about its possibility became the guiding questions for the French Symbolists discussed in Chapter XIX.

The interpretation of dreams in psychoanalysis likewise responded to the open nature of the world-book, and in particular the vacuum that the lack of meaning of the unconscious creates. We are compelled to interpret and make readable that which no longer has a divine, or a natural, or even a rational-human basis. (298-9) Blumenberg talks about this in his final chapter, on the developing scientific understanding of DNA according to the metaphors of readability, as ‘projecting readability where nothing has been left behind.’ (342).

The metaphor of the book has altered our relationship to reality in a way that first foregrounds the human over nature and fate, but soon creates a situation where the creative energy of ‘the metaphors of our capacity’ overtakes the world to which they refer. The metaphorical book is then emptied, or unwritten, or uninterpretable, although its force as metaphor remains.

As in his other works, Blumenberg writes a philosophical history that raises questions for theory as it rehearses past attempts at answering absolute questions. The book metaphor, rooted as it is in oracular textuality but applied also to the world and to human history understood as a product of human freedom, raises philosophical issues distinct from the semiotic conception of reality which allows readability. Also in play is the philosophical problem of double truth and

compatibilism (in this case, between the two books of God and of nature, or of nature and history). The Blumenbergian absolute metaphor deserves further exploration as an ambiguous, because nonconceptual, territory for the negotiation of these tensions. To what extent can readability be conferred upon multiple modes of our experience of the world? At what point does a plurality of metaphorical world-books stretch our understanding of the world too thinly to maintain coherence? The preconditions for these tensions are charted extensively in Blumenberg's study, and it invites future work on how the contradictions produced by the metaphors of readability in history have shaped its development.

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