

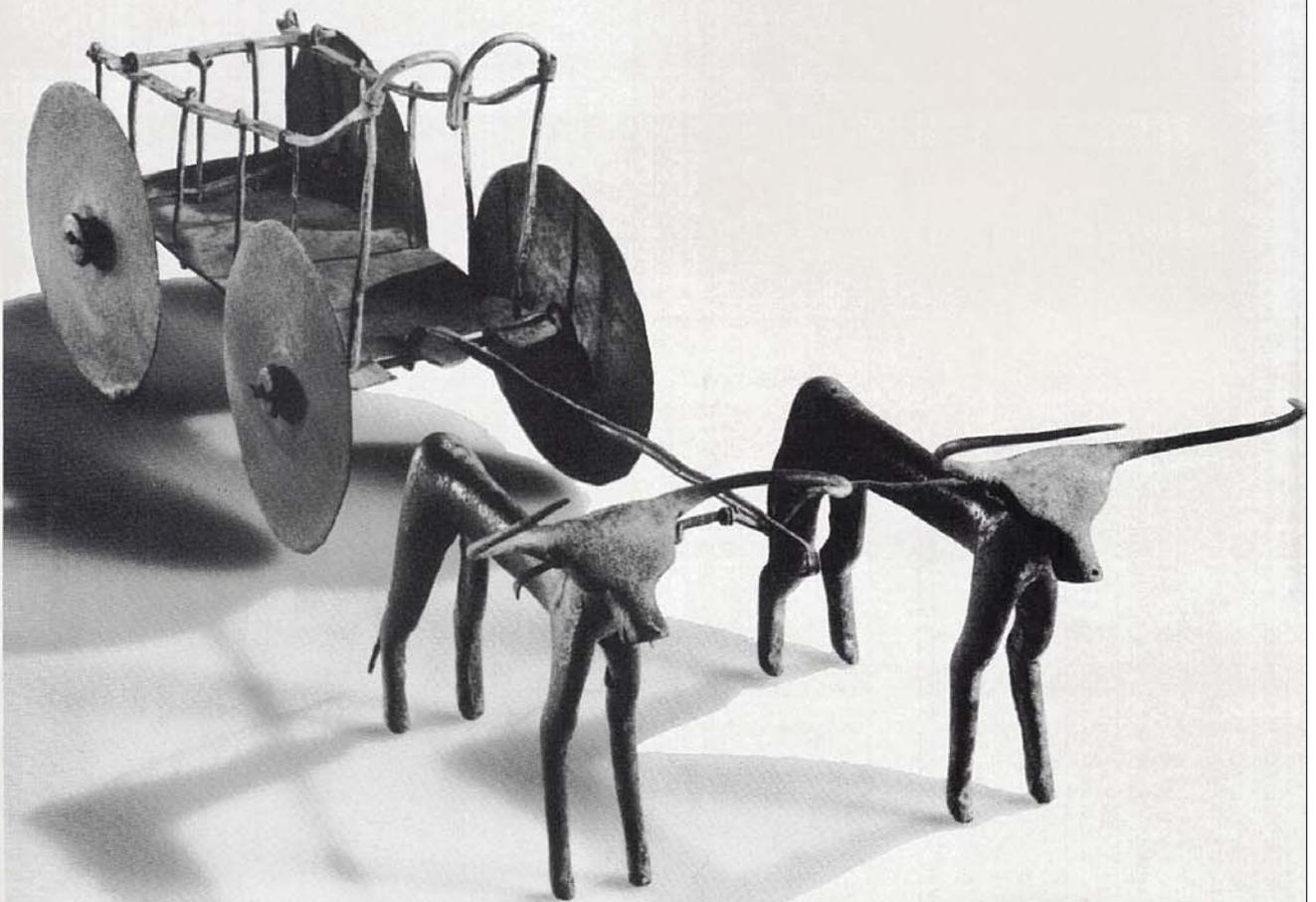
PREFACES

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DIAPHORA

Rhetorics, Allegory, and
the Interpretation of Postmodernity

by Peter Carravetta



“Peter Carravetta’s book is a remarkable example of the pluralism that characterizes the predicament of postmodern critical thinking. Carravetta’s theoretical proposal to conceive of postmodern hermeneutics as a diaphoristic, that is, as a theory of the difference at work in the dialogue; his account of postmodernity as an essentially rhetorical culture; and most notably, his original treatment of D’Annunzio as an *ante litteram* critic of the avant-garde — all these elements make this book an original contribution to the critical and philosophical reflection on postmodernity.” — Gianni Vattimo, author of *The End of Modernity*

“With *Prefaces to the Diaphora* Carravetta adds a strong and steady voice to the debate now raging over hermeneutics and postmodernism... In Carravetta’s hands, the ‘argument’ resembles a dialogue, a symposium where participants are given a generous hearing and differences advance the recovery of emergent truths. Readers are welcomed to the feast.” — John Paul Russo, author of *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work*

“Unlike so much of what has appeared after the Heideggerian-postmodern revolution, Carravetta’s book is not simply Neronian deconstruction, but an attempt at positive construction. It is not an attempt to destroy wisdom, but an attempt to restore poetics to its rightful position as ‘love of wisdom.’ It returns us to a time before the avenue to wisdom was monopolized by logique. We find, therefore,... a constructive use of ontological hermeneutics, phenomenology, and especially of rhetoric so as to regain wisdom.” — Edmund Jacobitti, of author of *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in Modern Italy*

“This is an important contribution to the discussion of postmodernity and hermeneutics, contemporary philosophy and literary theory. Carravetta is lively, engaging, original. He is not afraid to take risks: to argue for allegory as postmodern, to criticize Nietzsche’s use of aphorisms as atemporal, to propose a new ‘diaphoristic’ hermeneutics, [to argue] that the various forms of ‘avant-garde’ art and theory represent modern, not postmodern, thinking. Carravetta displays an enviable familiarity with the Nietzschean and Heideggerian corpus, to which he is heavily indebted for his view(s) of postmodernity. All in all, a solid, controversial, discussable, important contribution to the contemporary discussion.” — Richard Palmer, author of *Hermeneutics*

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PREFACE

This collection of studies and essays explores several topics in contemporary literary culture in a comparative, interdisciplinary, and experimental perspective. The overarching concern, at times explicitly treated but oftener alluded to, is the possibility of a novel way of interpretation which reactivates, as a hermeneutic figura, the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. Traditionally, the quarrel has been understood as the locus of an ineradicable conflict of interests, or of communication, between aesthetics and science, or between the poet and philosopher-critic caught in that web which nonetheless connects the so-called two cultures. However, elaborating some of the most radical critiques of the European tradition which have arisen with greater frequency during the last quarter of a century, and against the background of an epochal periodization — which comprises Ancient, Modern (modernism and the Avant-Gardes), and Post-Modern — what these chapters suggest is that perhaps the quarrel was never intended to be exclusively a quarrel, that, on the one hand, the real differences may lie elsewhere and, on the other, those we have inherited need to be reconceptualized or at the very least set in motion yet again.

The word *Diaphora*, which in Ancient Greek stood for the “quarrel” or “contest” or, more correctly, the “specific difference” among species, though in Aristotle is made to coincide with final form, definition, and by implication essence is here readapted to double as the umbrella notion for a difference predicated upon *movement*, *exchange*, and *figuration*. The part about figuration will be developed in terms of rhetorics and allegory, the part about movement and exchange is built right into the word, that is *dia*: “in between”, and *phora/pherein*: “bring across”, “bear”. The *Diaphora* then intends to signify a movement akin to a dialogue between and among forms of discourse that though typically exclusive of one another, are here made to relate and transfer signification from one semantic/hermeneutic position to another. It therefore sets the present studies on the margins of, and undoubtedly resonant with, ontological hermeneutic, phenomenology, deconstruction, discourse analysis, and rhetorics. By the same token, these “diaphoric” or “diaphoristic” readings will register only a distant echo of those forms of cultural critique which are rooted in, and can no longer be fully legitimated by,

New Criticism, Idealism/Historicism, formalism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and structuralism.

The specific areas of interest and concern here will gravitate towards historiography, rhetorics, allegory, mythography, the nature and function of literature, and possibility of a “philosophical criticism.” The actual chapters deal with the following.

Chapter 1 explores an emblematic figure at the interface between the Modern and Post-Modern. The study traces Nietzsche’s discovery, development, and theorization of the aphorism, juxtaposing his metacritical observation on language to the actual evolution of his rhetoric. His critique of philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic constructs goes as far as to reduce the discourse of knowledge to a pointism which overlaps with more canonical forms such as the motto, the proverb, the enigma, and the *pensée*, but which nonetheless speak to an abstract idea of essence and value. It will be argued that the aphorism is eternalizing and atemporal, and as such ultrameta-physical and alienating. Nietzsche in short will be compelled to explode into the allegorical mode, with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, so that he can reach an audience, recover the temporality of the utterance, and yet be critical and creative at the same time. This reading contrasts with the most authoritative views on the subject of Nietzsche’s language, such as we have from Heidegger, Deleuze, Cacciari, Lacou-Labarthe, Derrida, Alderman, Aiken, Kofman; it represents the prolegomenon to a new reading, presently in progress, of Nietzsche’s masterpiece. What has been lacking all along is greater consideration for the linguistics and the rhetorics of allegory, and its links with a primordial disclosedness of thinking, with myth as pre-philosophic, pre-scientific utterance nevertheless capable of structuring and organizing the emulative speech of individuals within social groups.

Chapter 2 is also basically the first part of a reinterpretation of D’Annunzio’s long –overlooked masterpiece *Maia* (1903). D’Annunzio is perhaps the most problematical writer of the century, in Italy as well as in Europe. In part due to stereotyped views about decadence, misconstrued ideas on the nature of aesthetics and of his aesthetic in particular, and cultural prejudices against any author who meddles outside of art or who speaks of self-affirmation (not to speak of his flirt with fascism), D’Annunzio

has been the thorn in the side of academic criticism, so much so that despite the obvious “greatness” of the writer, critics have always felt the compunction to qualify and explain in what “minor” ways he is still worthwhile reading. My view is that D’Annunzio is a much-explored but little-understood continent and that, if taken “seriously”, he may become the key author of the turn of the century, and of the overcoming of Modernity. Among the miscast criticism, that he did not “understand” Nietzsche. Let him or her who “understands” Nietzsche *thoroughly* cast the first critical stone!. The present study intends to show that the writer made a valid, appropriate, indeed revealing *revision* of Nietzsche in view of his own poetic evolution and in terms of the different conceptions of tradition, history, and language developed by the two authors. The analysis revolves around the notion of allegory developed by D’Annunzio, which recovers the historicalness of mythology, and the inescapable figuration of all discourse, two aspects which are at odds with the semiotized, permutable meta-images of nineteenth- and twentieth-century allegorism we have been trained to be more comfortable with.

Chapter 3 offers a critical overview of the tenets and the historical importance of the avant-gardes, sets them within the broader context of literary Modernism and the Modern Epoch (post-Renaissance to the post-World War II period), and suggests several reasons why, for all intents and purposes, and despite some cogent arguments to the contrary, the avant-gardes are all but “dead”. Hinted at (and developed in the other chapters as well) are also the reemergence of allegory and the preoccupation with the heteronomous, ethical-social possibilities of art. Subsequently, a brief theory and history of the Post-Modern is sketched, some current positions are critiqued, and my own version of Postmodernity is submitted.

Chapter 4 is an *esquisse* of a theory of interpretation as dialogue which contains *in nuce* the gist of *diaphoristics*. It begins with some insurmountable dualisms and often troubling paradoxes which besiege criticisms old and new and suggest their possible resolutions on the basis of an understanding of rhetorics which is not foreclosed to ontological, existential, and figurative instances. In doing so, criticism must *accept* the risks, indeed the constant betrayal, of its discourse, and look to the unreachable otherness

or alterity of the text as the motive force of future history. The key trans-aesthetic issue centers on how to change rhetorical (political) agonism into dialogue, competitive play into pleasure and joy. Interpretation in short acknowledges the positivity and creativity of the interim space-time between the purely poetic and the absolutely philosophical. In doing so, it will always be open to the social, the ethical, and the interpersonal aspect of “doing culture”.

Chapter 5 looks at the most clearheaded critique of the discourse of Modernity by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. Deeply critical of the social and political implications of any and all gestures of rationalization and appropriation, libidinal, technological, and otherwise, Lyotard discloses the path to a philosophical linguistics which is not unresponsive to some of the insights of analytical and pragmatic thought. His notion of *dif-férend* is predicated upon the immanence of the uttered sentence which must of necessity establish a contrast, a situational twist in signification between speakers and whose underlying motive is political or power oriented. Lyotard’s idea of language refuses poetological and ontological explications unless they are seen as a string of utterances whose meaning can be established only within an allocated (socially determined) family of phrases and in sharp opposition to other, necessarily excluded families of phrases. Thus habitual notions of semantics, syntax, signification, as well as philosophy itself, are reconceptualized in terms of the politics of speech.

Chapter 6 is a reading of the work of Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo in which some of the problematics raised in the preceding chapters are both confirmed and developed. Vattimo has been engaged in an unflinching critique of the “strong”, logocentric discourse of Modernity and all of its reifying, fetishistic rationalities since his early writings on Heidegger, the avant-gardes, Nietzsche, and ontological hermeneutics. Sensitive to the discourse of the human and social sciences as well as poetics and aesthetics, Vattimo has recently developed the notions of *Verwindung* and *weak ontology* which disclose stimulating ways of dealing with and inhabiting the reality of the decline of the West. His own texts move in-between theory and practise, the philo-

sophical and the rhetorical, the thought of difference and the inevitability of linguistic concrescence.

The book ends with a reflection on some problems to be dealt with at some length in the future, tackling as it does the *massimi sistemi* of Heidegger and Vico. As both thinkers have informed to some degree all the preceding chapters, what is here attempted is a conjoining of the immense contribution each made to our understanding of language and interpretation. This is achieved, albeit in an as yet sketchy manner, by critiquing one through the other. In fact, if there is no doubt that Heidegger is the thinker of Postmodernity par excellence, the philosopher who revealed the maniacal illusions, indeed perversions, of metaphysics and technology, it is also true that during the last twenty-five years Vico has been shown to have an uncanny capacity to have already addressed, historical considerations aside, many of the problems faced by a culture, *our* culture, which has exhausted both the linear, pregressive, rational, grounding in history, as well as the evolutionary, spiralic, spiritualistic belief in emancipation and utopia. Now more than ever, the, a dialogue between Heidegger and Vico is to be established in order to pursue the exchange between being and history, poetry and thought, art and science. Coherently with the title, this last essay more than the rest is but a Preface to the Diaphora.

Having to assemble these studies for publication made me aware of two things primarily. First, that more than what they prove or resolve, they retrospectively point to a host of other issues that need to be studied and explored further. Second, that most if not all should have been rewritten. I tried revising and updating, but it proved futile: it would have made a different book. Perhaps the variations in style, tone, and organization may gladden the few; more than that, perhaps the movement of a given problematic — for instance, the question of postmodern allegory, or the critique of irony — can be best appreciated by considering how it refracts in (apparently) unrelated contexts and stimulates further research: that would be a plus, what I or any critic can ever hope of obtaining from a book. This may further explain the title: these are but a gathering of introductions to a series of problems which concern our understanding of language and of interpretation. *Prefaces to the Diaphora* is then no more, but also no less,

than a series of preliminary researches, some detailed, others more general, which await a full-fledged theoretical study. But as we are constantly *unterweg zu* something or other, there is no compelling necessity to mortgage the future. What is sought in this book is an alternative to those approaches to the text which, confined to a predetermined number of metacritical moves during interpretation, end up confirming the Same at the expense of the Other.