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# TUNING IN/TO THE DIAPHORA. LYRIC, METAPHYSICS, AND THE REASONS OF ALLEGORY

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#### Questions

My initial working hypothesis is simple: lyrical poetry is quintessentially metaphysical. The questions to be developed: what happens to the lyric in the age of the decline and/or rejection of metaphysics, in the epoch of the forgetting of being and the "end" of philosophy, and the confrontation with the *Ab-grund* of the technological world view? And in this sociohistorical warp which has been witness to the fragmentation and shredding of the myths of modernity before the onslaught of a yet to be fully understood post-modernity, how can we rethink the possibilities of the poetic, of the rhetorical aspect of art, so that we may attempt to review the allegorical construct as the one most suited to this fin-de-siècle?<sup>1</sup> Fuller comprehension of the way I perceive the relationship between the lyrical and the allegorical will emerge in the following pages.

The questions must be framed, situated, yield up a code of sorts (even if ad hoc) so that we may talk about the problem at all. In order to satisfy this hermeneutic prerequisite, I shall then proceed by addressing four poetological scenarios or critical contexts.

### Historiography: Identity and Narration

"I look in vain for the poet whom I describe," begins Emerson's 1844 essay *The Poet,* articulating a desideratum in terms which reflect the then pressing question of the yet elusive identity of a national literature, a voice which spoke to the new great land without submitting to the thousand pressures of the European traditions, rich, complex, and proud of their inimitable geniuses. He goes on to say:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1[1]</sup>See the important long article by Craig Owens, and some of the studies inspired by Benjamin and de Man's work on allegory.

Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await. Dante's praise is that he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher, or into universality. We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer; then in the Middle Age; then in Calvinism. . . . Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for meters. <sup>2[2]</sup>

This wish, exhortation, or wager to meet the colossal challenge, was to be answered eleven years later by Walt Whitman with his *Leaves of Grass*. The literary history of the United States is deeply marked by this preoccupation, which begins actually even before the founding of the republic, with Michael Wigglesworth's *Day of Doom* (1662), Timothy Dwight's *The Conquest of Canaan* (1785), and then follows with John Barlow's *Vision of Columbus* (1797)—rewritten in 1807 with the title *The Columbiad*. The tradition of course is now ample and recognizes other such exemplars of what we might call the modernist epic or the modern long poem, each a turning point or an interstice of poetics and cultural politics, and circumscribing clusters of reusable ideologies, patterns for the rearrangement of history, implicit models for the understanding of being. <sup>3[3]</sup>

Let's continue by reflecting on what is embedded in those remarks: Poetic "autobiography" written "in colossal cipher" and elevated into "universality." Well, the latter two, are no longer true, no longer possible. Pound, Williams, and Ginsberg do try different solutions but they are consistent in ripping apart and reconfiguring a shattered self, a vanished or vanishing Origin, a too-long-honored belief in unity, or revelation, or emancipation. The pulse of the subject is irregular, the images an endless interplay of mirrors, certainties of any type (scientific, metaphysical, political) no longer there, alienation a quotidian reality, nihilism an uncanny possibility. Strangely enough, this has actually been beneficial to the genre of autobiography, which has witnessed a resurgence especially in communities only recently emerged, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2[2]</sup>Cited in Miller 26; in the background, let's bear in mind the studies on the imperial self, the adamitic strain, frontier mythology, as well as the trajectory from the absolutely free self in Whitman to its imprisoned or splintered counterpart in most post-WWII poetry and fiction.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3[3]</sup>These and the concomitant philosophic-mythical topics of discovery, the quest, the struggle against nature first and culture later, the vision of the final harmony can be critically culled from the earlier Daniel Bryan's *Adventures of Daniel Boone* (1813), to Thomas Ward's *Passaic*, to Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* (1855), and so on through the great revolutionaries of our century, such as Pound's *Cantos*, Crane's *The Bridge* (1930), Williams's *Paterson* (1946–63), till we reach Allen Ginsberg's 1972 long poem *The Fall of America*.

<sup>4[4]</sup>Not to speak of terms which today we cannot but either dismiss, deconstruct, or reframe. I mean, "tyrannous eye," "incomparable materials," "barbarism," and the implicit faith in a historical telos nourished by notions such as progress, power, identity, supremacy. The "canon wars" of the last fifteen years are in part a reaction to the devastating critiques of deconstructors, minority discourse, post-colonial politics, some wings of feminism, hyphenated writers, and those converted to the Internet.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5[5]</sup>Refer to the now widely circulated critical and philosophical literature on the subject (some of them listed in the References, below), from Black Studies, to Post-Colonial Critique, to key writings by Lyotard, Foucault, Deleuze & Guattari, Serres, Harvey, Conner, Vattimo, Rorty, and Taylor.

received wide critical attention. Autobiographies share this with the lyric: they concern the self, no matter how defined, above and beyond the formal differences between the two kinds of writing.

Subjectivity, grand values, and national allegories have been in profound crisis for the past quarter of a century, they have been considered suspect, deviously pretentious and foundationless, in need of revision or debunking, and have consequently spawned frenetic theoretical and political revolutions in the various disciplines and throughout society at large. 6[6] In this world picture, historiographical narratives pieced together from shreds and shards of the more canonical long narratives mentioned above show that poetry is still alive, albeit weakened, and by and large marginalized, confined to the cognoscenti, a filler in more mundane publications. What's more, its "contents" (if I may be allowed to use this term, for clarity's sake) point to pursuits that are confusing, excessively personal, and often chimerical. Not that these lyrical poets are totally alienated from the humus of their cultural unconscious. Twentieth-century poetics wrestled with realities in dramatic, inspiring, ways. James Miller's thorough reconstruction of the specifically American ("whitmanesque") "Personal Epic" explores the motivations and the literary techniques adopted when confronting the expression, embodiment, and characterization of the consciousness of the times (Hart Crane), the rewriting of history in a dilated present (Pound), the relationship between personal mood and its fragmented global picture (Eliot), the inability in the twentieth century to (re)locate the dream (as in John Berryman's Dream Songs or Ginsberg's Fall of America), the impossibility of finding "My Being" even when conflating America with its pre- or non-European heritage (as in Charles Olson's Maximus Poems), or acknowledging the failure of language when it meets up with chaos (Paterson). Perhaps this catalogue would best serve to enter into an interminable discussion on the double, bifurcate soul of America, polarized between the Enlightenment dicta of universal democratic egalitarism and free will, free individual choice in an edenic, frontier mythology of self reliance, competitiveness, survival of the fittest, living the just battle. Yet if the nineteenth century struggled to find its national identity with the corresponding representative man, the twentieth century struggled to isolate, describe, and place (or situate in a broader context, society, world) the innermost soul of the individual, that "something" typically called "self" which the developing disciplines, the new epistemologies on the horizon—such as psychology. phenomenology, physics, and biology-in their various ways probed and scanned, experimented with and decreed that its proper place was in a (ideologically suspicious, to be sure) growing network of ever restricting fields of inquiry. The picture is obviously more complex, owing to the asymmetrical dystopic manifestations, in Western societies, of any number of often contradicting and conflicted poetries, dominant or hegemonic ideologies, and newer, struggling, yet critically challenging social subjects.<sup>7[7]</sup> Nevertheless.

figure and the past ten years, in journals such as *Cultural Critique*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Representations*, *Boundary 2*, *Social Text*, *Rethinking Marxism*, *New Literary History*, *Popular Culture*, and others, as well as in publications in the areas of anthropology and philosophy. See References for some representative critics. <sup>7[7]</sup>See the works of Homi Bhaba, Edward Said, the anthology by JanMohamed and Lloyd, and the special issue on "Post/Colonial Conditions" of *Yale French Studies*.

even at this level of abstraction, these "personal epics" speak to and refract the three words of my title: lyric, metaphysics, and the reasons of allegory. What is it about the lyric which prompts us to declare it finally moribund—like metaphysics—and look to the allegorical as the task of poetics and cultural critique?

# Theory of the Lyric: Leopardi as Paradigm

Let me illustrate this with an emblematic example. In a note written in 1819, Giacomo Leopardi observes that "Everything has been perfected from Homer onwards, except poetry."

The statement is sweeping, categorical, and yes, metaphysical. But in order not to pluck it out of the 4000 pages of the *Zibaldone* and use it extemporaneously to support any claim I might be tempted to make concerning the nature and history of lyric poetry, let us read it first in the context of the period, in the wake of Schiller's essay on *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, against the background of the polemic between the promoters of a Romantic poetics (which Leopardi critiques and rejects) and those of a classicist or "Hellenistic" poetics (which Leopardi upholds). Moreover, we cannot entirely ignore the other tenets or aspects of Leopardi's own complex personal poetics. Not much later (Sept. 18, 1820), Leopardi writes: "The lyric can be said to be the peak, the pinnacle, the summit of poetry, which makes it the highest point of human discourse." In another *Zibaldone* entry written six years later, we find another similar observation:

Insofar as genres are concerned, poetry is essentially made up of three true and great subdivisions: lyric, epic, and dramatic. Proper of any nation, even savage ones, the lyrical mode [il lirico] is the most noble and is more *poetic* than the rest. It is proper of any man, even the unlettered, who wishes to recreate or console himself through song, and with words measured in whatever way, and with harmony; a frank [schietta] and free expression of any true and deeply felt human feeling. The epic is born after and from this; it is in a way nothing more than an amplification of the lyrical. . . . <sup>8[8]</sup>

In this same passage he also offers a definition of the epic, which I cite because I will utilize some of his statements later when I reframe the allegorical basis of poetry:

The epic poem also was sung with the lyre or with music, in the streets, for the people, like the earliest lyric poems. It is nothing more than an hymn to honor the heroes and the nations or its armies; an extended hymn. See for instance the songs of savages, and those of bards, which partake of both the epic or the lyrical, wherein often we cannot tell to which of the two genres to assign them. . . . The dramatic is the last of the three genres both in terms of time and nobility. It is not an inspiration, but an invention, it is the daughter of civilization, not of nature, poetry on the basis of convention and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8[8]</sup>After the Hellenistic and Latin period, Dante also defends the superiority and primacy of lyric poetry, understood as "can-zone"; cf. *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, II, iii et infra.

the will of its authors, not owing to its essence. . . . Drama is not proper to uncultured nations. It is spectacle, the offspring of civilization and otium, the creation of man's ingeniousness, not the inspiration of nature. . . . All others can be reduced to these three heads, or are genres distinguished not by poetry but by meter or some other external device. The elegiac is the name of a meter . . . the didactic, insofar as is embodies true poetry, is either epic or lyric.

In this hierarchized poetology, drama does not fare well, as it is historically and genealogically considered a derivative art, the product of contrived intelligence. It is not "natural" and, insofar as it deals with minute details, with situations which are ultimately simple, it speaks to something considered to be "truth." But the "truth" is irregular and disharmonic, says Leopardi, and rests on imitation. And poetry is *not* imitation, <sup>9[9]</sup> he says elsewhere (August, 1828):

Imitation bears with it something servile. It is very false to consider and define poetry as an imitative art, compare it with painting, etc. The poet imagines: imagination sees the world as it is not, it constructs a world which does not exist, it makes believe, invents, it does not imitate, I mean it does not purposely imitate: creator, inventor, not imitator: this is the essential character of poetry. <sup>10[10]</sup>

<sup>9[9]</sup>Antithetical in this to Wordsworth, who in the "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" conceives of the language of poetry as imitating "the very language of men," downplaying genre differences and laureate diction, and from which stem his other corollaries concerning description, the needed focus on a subject, the acceptance of an intermediary structure like the image: "poetry is the image of man and nature," and finally the much cited: "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind" (Norman 154). In view of what will be argued later is the necessity to restore that referentiality to poetry which is typical of prose and allegories, we could read Wordsworth as a subterranean precursor for those poetics which cannot exist independently of their socio-historic context, were it not for the pervasive quasi-didactic and sermonizing theology it embodies, which has nothing postmodern about it.

On the complex evolution of the lyric and its turning, through Western history, into a self-effacing literariness, see the insightful study by W. R. Johnson, especially the Introduction, which touches on the problematic "you" of the speaking lyrical persona through an essentially monodic voice, and the foibles of the eternally exiled self in twentieth-century poetry in "search for this invisible ideal" (2). Interestingly, Johnson opens her book with a reference to the Eliot of "The Three Voices of Poetry" who, manifesting a certain continuity with Leopardi and Baudelaire, argues that "the first-voice poet is expressing 'his own thoughts and sentiments to himself or to no one'. This voice, this poetic genre, he elects to designate as 'meditative verse' and it is meditative verse that for him replaces outmoded lyric, which was perhaps never quite genuine in any case" (1). But meditative speech is still focused on a subject, on an ego-consciousness, on the construction of an "I," a "self," above and before the "others." Therefore, once again, not an imitation of the world, but its actual invention, its very creation out of essentially nothing! In this light one can appreciate the recent reading of Wallace Stevens's poetry from a phenomenological and Heideggerian perspective.

of detached facts, which have no other bond of connection than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect, the other, THE POEM, is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all

If we look at what Leopardi thinks of metaphysics, which is often equated with philosophy tout court, it shouldn't surprise us to read that "it is the exact contrary of poetry," and that its "foundation is that everything is relative," that "without ideology it becomes an uncertain, frivolous science, full of dreams and unsustainable conjectures," that its endless questions concerning time and space "are nothing more than a logomachy born out of little clarity in ideas and even less capacity to analyze our intellect" (Norman 180).

Let's consider what we have here. We are in the throes of a nature/culture debate, of an inspiration versus imitation dialectic, of a poetry versus philosophy guarrel. Considered from a different angle, there existed in Leopardi's cultural context a cult for a supposed authenticity and primacy of the ancients, which, by the way, was marshalled against the coming barbarism of the affected, journalistic reality of the early nineteenth century. I am not interested in evaluating Leopardi's overall poetic, or whether there are or aren't "contradictions" in his position. Poetry, and the lyric in particular, is not history, which is concerned with the *verosimile*, with that which is likely, believable as Aristotle would say. We do know that elsewhere Leopardi displays a hermeneutic sensibility concerning changing mores and values. When he prefaces collections of poems or translations, he reveals that he is ever wary that the edition is meant for a contemporary audience. The conclusion is therefore inescapable: poetry is not philosophy. 12[12] as it does not deal (ideally, in its most perfect exemplars) with concepts, relations, explanations, and justifications. The lyric, of which the idyll is a finely honed, crystal-pure form, expresses "situations of the soul, personal feelings, adventures of my soul" and is ultimately not concerned with the reader, with anyone other than oneself (or One's Self).

Leopardi implies as much when, in an early entry in the *Zibaldone* (August 25, 1820), he writes:

other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur the other—that is, poetry—is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature." This explains why you can be lyrical and epigraphic at the same time, as in his *Adonais*, or even as in Foscolo's *Ceneri*. See moreover in the *Defence*: "Poetry [is] . . . the expression of the imagination: and poetry is conate with the origin of man . . ." (Norman 180).

<sup>11[11]</sup>Cf. "Dell'errore attribuito a Innocenzo per aver dipinto Apollo piuttosto col violino che con la lira" (1: 964–65), and various of the "Prefazioni," "Manifesti," and "Appunti," written between 1825 and 1836.

<sup>12[12]</sup>Compare once again with Wordsworth: "Aristotle, I have been told, has said, that poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general and operative" (Norman 146–47) Notice that this would be coherent with a poetry that intends to teach a morality, a sensitivity, a way of looking at nature. And is diametrically opposed to Coleridge's observation in the *Biographia Literaria* whereby "a poem is that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth" (163). At the same time, though, if we continue with the above Wordsworth passage, we cannot miss the simultaneous claim to an independent poetic world, one which is informed by an absolute autonomy, a self-sustaining whole: "[truth . . .] not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives competence and confidence to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. Poetry is the image of man and nature" (147).

The only thing the poet must show is that he doesn't understand the effect which his images, descriptions, feelings, etc., will produce in his readers. This is true of the orator, and any writing of beautiful literature, and it could be extended to any writer in general. *Il ne parait point chercher à vous attendrir*, says cardinal Maury of Demosthenes ([in his] "Discours sur l'eloquence"), écoutez-le cependant, et il vous fera pleurer par reflexion. . . .

If any affectation is permitted the writer, this consists in not being . . . there, aware, ears pitched; or in his/her not foreseeing the beautiful effects which the words will have on those who read or listen, and of having no will or specific aim beyond that of narrating, celebrating, etc. <sup>13[13]</sup>

Historiography and Hermeneutics

Keeping to the general discoursive possibilities of recent critical theory, philosophy of language, and hermeneutics, we ought seriously consider whether perhaps lyric poetry never meant to communicate anything at all! As Hugo Friedrich, in his classic study Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik, identifies the many traits of twentieth-century lyric such as depersonalization, emptyness of ideals, highlighting the ugly, the incongruent, the ironic, the absurd, and so it doesn't escape his notice that perhaps the obscurity, incomprehensibility, the disinterest in the reader or the others (as opposed to a metaphysical Other) may be something tied to a deeper problem of language. Baudelaire wrote: "there's a certain glory in not being understood," while several decades later Montale was to echo him: "No one would write verse if the problem of poetry were that of being understood." 14[14] As I have explored elsewhere. 15[15] the response of criticism to this disdainful intransigence has been misquided. Some have attempted to reconfigure criticism into a poetology in order to take into account this fundamental realization, 16[16] while others have redrawn the map to demonstrate that poetry as a genre is itself headed toward a merger with prose. 17[17]

A poem which speaks of the person's ego, or self, or Being, is by definition a lyric poem. A metaphysics is always presupposed, less often clearly stated, certainly a semantic or conceptual necessity, as we shall see in a moment. The reasons of allegory have in part been already introduced, albeit by inference and certainly allusive manner. The epic is almost by definition allegorical in that its capacious temporal frame requires and then uses certain poetological conventions, such as personification, prosopopeia, plot development,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13[13]</sup>This by way of prefacing his distaste for the employ of all those diacritical devices found in the work of Byron, which he holds to be self-indulging and self-aggrandizing, disrespectful of the reader, in a way excessively meta-textual, to the detriment of what he otherwise considers a fine mind and poetic sensibility.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14[14]</sup>Cited in Friedrich 14 et infra. See also the historical and topical study by Killy, especially the chapter on allegory (94–113). Still useful for the phenomenological explication of the dynamics between poetry and aesthetics, and how it evolved from the Renaissance through the major avantgardes is Anceschi's *Autonomia ed eteronomia dell'arte* (originally written in 1936), which prepared the way for his later more specific study, *Le poetiche del novecento in Italia* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15[15]</sup>See Carravetta 1991, especially chapters one and two.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16[16]</sup>See the interesting book by Pimenta, which deserves close analysis.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17[17]</sup>Berardinelli's book also deserves close reading and discussion within the context of a critique of the Western Canons *from within* so to speak.

alternating first and third persons, in short, it exists and makes sense primarily owing to its constant referencing to a broader, non-textual set of concerns, values, symbols. The reasons for the presence of allegorical language are also embedded in these external, contextual frames of reference (and, I will argue, co-founding, co-enabling force. the movement. metamorphosis, the very possibility of otherness). In terms of semiotics and the philosophy of language, a rethinking of what allegorical language is or might be requires that the very notion of the sign, which underlies our ideas about language and how we interpret its workings, be altered, shifting from a dualistic signifier/signified model to an unstable triangle in which the reference, the third apex of the older models (and of which Peirce's remains the most elaborate) regains its role, permits relinking with whatever notion of situation of reality, or society, or history, the interpreter chooses to analyze the texts. [18[18]] It is true that allegorical writing has witnessed a decline during the Modern period. Particularly in the nineteenth 19[19] and in the twentieth century both poets and critics have repeteadly shunned it. Part of the rejection was probably due to the automatic association of allegory with epic and then didactic poetry. Moreover, another truism of modernity considered the novel the true heir of the epic, and the novel is not particularly suited to allegories, at least insofar as the dominant schools turned to realism, naturalism, and "lyrical" prose symbolism. 20[20] But that is owed to our habit, imprinted in the schools and reinforced by authoritative poets and critics, of conceiving of allegory as a genre, as a typology, or as a strategy of artistic expression which had a reason to be in earlier eras, but which, with the explosion of the Romantic movement in Europe, was condemned to the attic, object of historical inquiry, at best didactically revised for children's literature. The story is well known. To give two eminent examples. from opposing aesthetic and critical grounds, both Croce and Luckacs condemned allegory as "artificial," a structural, architectonic panoply, an extrinsic component, not really poetry. On the one hand, then, the epic and its allegorical sign system had metamorphosized into the novel, wherein the object of narrative was no longer overarching themes such as religious or ethical values, or the singing of praise or demise of larger than life characters, but

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18[18]</sup>Again, I am summarizing in perhaps too formulaic a manner researches and readings done at different times and different occasions. For the studies in linguistics, rhetorics, and critical methodologies, see my *Hermes* book. For a more sustained argumentation on the counterposition between lyric and allegory see the *Prefaces* book. It is understood that my attempt at recapturing the referent, the "excluded middle" (see Serres 67, 69 et infra), is hardly hegelian, coming in fact after the "age of suspicion" (Ricoeur), and "the end of philosophy" (Heidegger). From this the exploratory nature of my article.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19[19]</sup>I am not unaware of sheafs of "national(istic)" poems that were practically written for every battle and war, some enduring through school adoptions. This probably contributed to the banalizing of the required allegories, but most of them have disappeared from the Canon (though in Europe their "fortune" among the general populace has often been a function or result of the political orientation of the Ministries of Education). For our purposes, however, particularly instructive is to follow Baudelaire's struggle against the allegoricism of Hugo (especially in the *Contemplations*), in an effort to cancel out "allegory" as style, tropology, or reservoir of traditional mythemes. But he may also have prepared the path for a deeper understanding of the allegorical which implicates the gesture and materiality of the poet as well as the location and interest of interpreter.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20[20]</sup>A related topic which we cannot develop here is the curious evolution of the prose poem and the *petit-récit*.

rather microscopic, introspective, and localized events and accidents. And yet, we might interject, can anyone not call Melville's *Moby Dick* America's grandest allegory? But I am getting ahead of myself. On the other hand, despite and in part against the major figures who still wrote poetic histories and paid homage silently to Clio and overtly to Calliope—Foscolo, Byron, Hugo, Dossi, Browning, Longfellow—the crown of the writing arts was passed on to lyrical poetry, which allowed other muses to step in/to the poet's ken: Euterpe, Tersicore, Erato.

I took Leopardi as representative of an idea of the lyric which I believe is quintessentially Modernist. Again, not that there weren't other romantic poets whose notion of the lyric was somewhat different, argued on the basis of a less axiological or hierarchical subdivision of the three primary genres. We could list Wordsworth, or Keats, or Victor Hugo. But the rejection of content, of any philosophical, epistemological content, seems to be a general trend. This entails rejecting the tenability of cognitive phrasing, denying the legitimacy, the agent force of an outside, which includes relations among peoples and institutions. These were at best read ironically, at worst as props, pretexts, or preliminaries to an inner swerve. The rhetoric of the lyrical is predicated through an expression, upon an underlying metaphysical assumption, which attracts and subsumes the world to itself, as the meanings tweeked out of experience conflate in the unity of the I, and the obsessive need to embody a general, universal, sweeping gesture, or ultimate (tragic) truth.

Nerval, Poe, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, *l'art pour l'art*, and the ultimate radicalization by Mallarmé, and then Valéry: the autonomy of the work of art finds in the lyric the crystallized isolation of its own revelations, the overload of apocalyptic illuminations. Language folds upon itself, the signifier swallows up all possible signified, while the serpent eating its own tail implied in self-referentiality evokes by indirection the "eternal" self-consuming voice of a (non)Being. Its words stand for themselves, its naming is non-directional, its sense meanders in unintelligibility. Was this an undisclosed intention, a practical "de-fence?" As Gadamer put it:

In the end, it is easy to appreciate why in the age of mass communication . . . lyric poetry necessarily has a hermetic character. How can the word still stand out amid the flood of information? How can it draw us to itself except by alienating us from those all too familiar turns of speech that we all expect?<sup>21[21]</sup>

This doesn't mean that a philosphy is not lurking somewhere, that a metaphysic isn't negotiated with that disinterested, unimportant reader. One need only to think of some poems by Montale, Machado, T. S. Eliot, Guillén, and Stevens to retrieve the common origin of both poetizing and thinking, of the poetic petitioning for a sound philosopheme. But such co-incidence inevitably highlights the relation to a unity or whole which, whether absent, bygone, or projected, speaks of a Supernal Eidos. Not different the fate of that alternative to pure poetry which claims to speak-to or address something vaguely called reality, such as in committed poetry. Whether philosophical or political,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21[21]</sup>Gadamer 135, from chapter "Philosophy and Poetry" 131–39.

referentiality in literature has been the great victim of Modernity. As Gadamer aptly puts it:

For all direction to a goal as we find it in military or revolutionary poetry is clearly distinguished from what is to be called "art," and for no other reason than that insofar as it is purely directed to a goal, it manifestly lacks the concentrated form of poetry. (136)

My question at this juncture is the following: How do we read literature that comes from a world, from a social, personal, historical experience totally alien to ours. Consider the literature of minorities, marginals, foreigners, exiles, immigrants, border-crossers, polyglots, mestizos, bi-nationals, technological world travelers, electronic virtual arts . . . and the reticence or better resistance they encounter on the basis not only of falling short of our tried but worn romantic and then modernist forms, but perhaps primarily owing to their inability, at the level of "content," to strike a note of recognition promise a utopia, redeem us somehow. 22[22]

### Difference and Narration

If we look at Native American Literature, for example, we discover that, much like pre-Socratic poetry according to Hölderlin and Heidegger, words are imbued with magical powers, they exist in their own right, conserve a sacrality and a connectedness with spirit, with Being. But unlike Western poetry, it does not know the evolution toward a hierarchy of values, a distillation of something called the self or the ego, and a progressive alienation from the surroundings, be they nature or culture. Native American literature is predicated—the word is carefully chosen—upon a language that is fundamentally a connection between beings and entities, trascending the supremacy of (politically defined) "people," revolving in cyclical time, seeking junctures and relations among all things created and imagined. Indeed the very organization of ideas is radically different from our own. 23[23] There is hardly a "master plot" in our Renaissance or Enligthenment or Modernist sense of the expression. Characters are defined more by the number of worlds they inhabit, the boundaries they cross, the obstacles to spiritual balance and interconnectedness, than by the obstacles to attain a goal, a quest for truth, a search for one's self. One's self is fundamentally a self-in-relation-to-the-all, the locating of a particle in simultaneous contact with all realms, beyond hierarchies, before "civilized" norms and "laws." But this may lead someone to view American Indian literature as possessing a metaphysics of its own. Yes and No. Insofar as it expresses a world-view, yes, but that's like saying all humans breathe and walk. If you can narrate, you can cut and shape your world. But insofar as this poetry is emi-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22[22]</sup>In the background we can hear the shrill "defences" of the Great Canon of Western Literature. Rather than listing the main advocates pro and con in the debate, I should like to point out in passing that the issue for me is not so much a question of inclusion/exclusion of certain texts, but rather of how to read them . . . there are ways of re-reading our own deeply embedded master plots and symbols as to make them appear . . . foreign, or anti-canonic, or at any rate still potentially able to disclose views both ethic and aesthetic which go against the grain.
<sup>23[23]</sup>Still crucial for our purposes remain the insights of Whorf, Sapir, and Benveniste.

nently out-looking through time and memory, insofar as it needs an external component—nature, mineral, spirit, symbol, listener—and insofar as it essays to transcend or circumvent the West's obsession with entities and manipulable effects, with further proof of abstracted emotional, social and political values, then it is not metaphysical, as it will not yield to the autonomous play of signifiers, it will not be enslaved by the *instrumentum*. American Indian literature manifests a lived temporality, binds myth back to the unconscious, requires at the rhetorical level an audience, a memory, and finally will not be blinded by the light of its own revelations.

The critically legitimate doubt that may arise here is whether we draw closer to an idea of literature in touch with theological beginnings, with founding purposes, with the establishment of a sacred saying, an all encompassing pneuma. This is not necessarily negative, provided we do not fall back into one of the many instrumental poetics of Modernism, and specifically the sermonizing kind, committed to convert to a cause or faith, or didactically aimed at instilling imperial moralities and universal values. Rather, as both Vico and Heidegger in unrelated ways suggested, the poetic voice is founding, it is the speech of the gods, the principle and the possibility of social coexistence. As I suggested elsewhere, we ought to reconsider Vico's intuition (later proved to be anthropologically, mythologically consistent) concerning the theological myths sung by earliest tribes and clans, what we used to call "primitive" cultures, on the cusp between primate in-fans and homo sapiens loqui. Yet already by the time Greece reaches its peak cultural splendor and hegemony, narrative, allegorical poetry is discredited, the knowledge its "myths" and "representations" carried was considered untenable, certainly not what philosophy, dialectic, logic could now deliver. And if you wanted to see, feel, hear the anguished soul of man's being, then you would turn to lyric, to dramatic monologue. These fantastic, poetic narrations have been lost to the West . . . all attempts at recapturing a presumed contiguity between sign and thing, word and object, speech and image in the pre-Socratics turned out to be elegant soliloguies and wishful thinking.

We are not interested in recovering anything "original" in the West simply because the notion has served its purpose (especially during the consolidation of monarchies and then nation states) but was quickly turned into a verbal weapon of oppression and intimidation, of latent racism and explicit arrogance. My view is that we forget trying to be original in the West (the avant-gardes took care first to radicalize the notion, exacerbate it, and finally disintegrate and mock its value). <sup>24[24]</sup> In fact, if the problem of origin still obsesses the critical mind, then perhaps we should train our sights on the new emerging literatures (whether within a given national sphere, or deterritorialized), but without constantly comparing them to the many (and convenient) revisions we have of our own. In this way we would also have experience of a spiritual, ethical, personal, intellectual, and historical context which speaks a different tongue, which may not be easily compared and hierarchized vis-à-vis our own canons, and may morever offer up hermeneutic possibilities within which to change, or critique, our own imperial and self-contained nations and egoes. Certainly methodological savvy and redirected ethnography could identify recurring

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24[24]</sup>See my *Prefaces*, ch. 3, and the discussion on the authors and critics who contributed to this problematic.

symbolisms and plot out a map, as an earlier generation of structuralists enthusiastically did. But as argued above and elsewhere, this would entail the semiotization of allegory, and defuse the event-full, spiritual. unrepresentable dimension of the narrative. This situation is in our times further complicated by the massive cross-pollination of values and fragmented intromissions of Euroamerican modes of speaking, grammars, preconstituted paths through society. The writer and the public of the Native American are exposed to contradictory choices, to strange habits, to unforeseen situations, to inexplicable monstrosities. Joy Harjo's poems, for example, speak of the necessity to "Remember" the inextricable connection to the environment, to the suturing power of the imagination as it leaps and relates moon to woman to creation to stages to cycles to the moon once again. It is a call to tune in the flow and the processes, the interdependence of being and beings. Life is not conceived like a river with a source and an end but more like a fluid tangible memory which like the tides of an ocean lap, splash, and crunch stones sand and shells. As much as an aesthetic artifact, a poem is a healing chant, a thinking of the cosmos. This can be seen as a critique of Western modernist forms of poetry. In another author, Leslie Silko, the main character is caught between several worlds, constantly attempting to regain his original wholeness as taught to him when he was a child on the reservation, but also constantly attempting to understand the horrors of World War Two and in particular of the atomic bomb. No conclusive "objective" reason can be reached, neither by the West's own logic, nor by his Indian perception of the cycles of nature. Communicating this across the boundary separating the two is utterly impossible. The main character Tayo takes it upon himself to reach a level of consciousness which can embody the aspirations and the failings of both cultures. His recourse to a ceremony points to the need to avoid falling prey to the self-destructive logic of the West and to re-instate a communal spirit in an already changing Indian society. Works of this kind speak to the need to reconsider the unsteady semantics of inter-linguistic, cross-cultural communication. Here the background referents are not stable symbols or icons, but a panoply of mixed, grafted, or inlaid semantemes which have sclerotized if not altogether lost their original signification—and this on both sides, for both cultural/philosophical world views—and which require a risky but inescapable hermeneutic participation on the reader/listerner's part. This uncertainty, a distinguishing trait of the postmodern condition, is a constant reminder that Platonic Being is now at most to be understood as a being-in-becoming, the voice of a feeling and understanding which highlights its own passing, its transitoriness, its recounting the harmony yet to be gained. (It is only in political speeches that Native Indians speak of repossessing their original lands and live again according to ancient rituals.) Yet in their poetry, even after the extermination of the Indian nations, the possibility of being connected to the whole recurs as a background lament, a future memory, a primary yearning.

## Allegories of Silence

When I made it to school they thought I didn't have a mind in English and if you don't have a mind in English you have a mind in nothing Our most interesting contemporary narratives are those which are deterritorialized, non-canonic, "small" in terms of their audience and acceptance, "long" in terms of their verbal structure. A literature which must be read allegorically because it speaks-other, or lets a (previosuly undisclosed) alterity emerge which is not necessarily referrable to our European models, is that of the Caribbeans. For centuries it was held that the local populations did not and could not have had a Grand Literary Tradition, they just didn't have the elements (the "historical record," the monuments, the great deeds—great by our sclerotized standards—the identifiable reassuring and legitimating lofty genealogies). Until we realized that they didn't have what we thought they should have had, that is, they spoke a different language, held different beliefs, had had no significant (by our standards) evolution of forms, institutions, ways of expressing themselves.

The necessity to "invent" the meaning, and the social, aesthetic, professional responsability of this gesture goes hand in hand with the necessity to allegorize—or should we say, the impossibility of not allegorizing when we interpret, when we write. But this mode of allegorizing is yet to be fully articulated into a theory. 26[26] because it cannot be levered on universals of any sort, it cannot moreover be content to exist and express itself locally (that would be accomplished through indices, signals, orders, commands, instructions, dedicated utterances, finally audio reproductions), or hark back to a rehashed Voltairian backyard, and finally it cannot be understood in a demanian, grammatological sense, an intertextual buzzing of metonymically driven transcendental signifiers. The allegory I am attempting to write about requires a different understanding of the rhetorical, one which has reconnected with ancient but undeveloped possibilities <sup>27[27]</sup> while fully open to the metamorphosis of history, in other words attuned to, rooted in, and aware of the irrevocable now, the jetz-time of the utterance, my Being-in-the-world today and here and in the company of such and such persons and within this specific place (city, town, desert, canyon). Otherwise stated: Rhetoric is both: always topical because language—poetic, philosophical, socially accepted or likely to be accepted—is at once an expression of a theory, a view which confers sense and coherence to what is being talked about, some vague unitary idea that can serve as the (even if provisional) master code, or theorem, or god; and ever a dynamic construction of a methodics of sort, requiring the act/intention of selecting and ordering of the words in the string such that expository patterns are achieved and made to function persuasively. A creative linguistic arrangement called a story, a long poem, is primordially allegorical in the sense that its telling, its having to be read (possibily aloud) to/by a public (no matter how small) ensures a modicum of consideration for the other insofar as the others, assumes that something can at any rate be conveyed across. Unlike the lyric, a story may

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25[25]</sup>Cited in Gonzalez 374.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26[26]</sup>I have attempted some preliminary hypotheses in my reading of Nietzsche and of D'Annunzio, cf. *Prefaces to the Diaphora*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27[27]</sup>I am thinking of the work by Salvioni, Plebe, Melandri, Ricoeur, Grassi, and Valesio whose notion of the rhetorical highlights the aporias and theoretical (and political) untenability of the Plato-Aristotle tradition, and rethink Chorace, Isocrates, Gorgias, Zeno and others. Much of my work in this area is contained in the *Hermes* book.

want to say something about something else, other lives, different stories, transfigured characters, an alternative geography, a whirring cosmos. Moreover, because it is grounded in the speaking act, the rhetoric of allegory cannot exclude the body, its specificity, its actions and memories, and from that in growing semantic circles the social, political, aesthetic facades of conventions and institutions as well. Otherwise said, and fully articulated elsewhere, the allegorical nature of human language is originary, a generator of forms and possibilities, of societal and political rites and rituals, of artifacts, in short: myths, even of theories . . .

As we have seen, historically at least, the allegorical impulse, the figurative power of language-in-action, has been made into reusable allegories with specific stylized values. The fundamental rhetoric of human communication and interaction was similarly changed into a system, a tropology, finally a repertoire to manipulate discourse . . . Only the lyric mode remained as the last bastion, elitist and indifferent to the destiny of the world, a highly unstable incandescent language of access to a more primal being. For that charge alone, of speaking the enthusiasmos and global connectedness and euphoria we associate with a Dyonisian moment, we have gladly allowed the lyric a preeminent status, a special ontology for the (s)elected few, ignore the rest, the non-initiates, the nonvisionary. We die alone, so we experience bliss alone. This is fine, but does not do when experience beyond the personal is to be artistically, poetically embodied. In the West this task was taken up by philosophy, by metaphysics, by epistemology, by ethics. The only problem is that this gesture has been consistently predicated upon a set of undemonstrable axioms, the great Immutables. Allegories too have served as the encyclopedias of nations, as generators and legitimators of mythemes which permitted social organizations and codes of values. To clarify, we might say here that the mytheme is to allegory what the episteme is to the philosophy of knowledge. However, owing to their rhetorical, persuasive, existential, audience-conscious style and pathos and theme, allegories retain a necessary differentiating trait, something which marks and both expresses and hides the specificity of its historical occurrence, the pregnancy of its political objectives, the tantalizing prospect of yet another metaphor, and world. What I am then suggesting is that the allegorical dimension of narration be revalued when confronted with texts from alien, foreign, previously inexistent literatures, or "radically new" aesthetic events, but without resorting to the tropology and pantheon of overdetermined sclerotized mythemes which can be read as epistemes, as the "rational" organization of a culture's ways of being. Think of the work of Levi-Strauss. The point is to avoid the totalization and ultimate Word which in a way both lyric and metaphysics aspire to.

Today, an allegorical take on these new literatures can alone permit us to venture into their complex worlds and return with a sense of having experienced a radical sense of difference, of otherness. The jarring paradoxical tension between fact and saying, enables a *diaphor* which not only further deconstructs the blinding arrogance of the pseudoplatonic, Enlightenment and Modernist ethos of self-aggrandizing (or self-deprecating, which is the same in a dualistic scheme of things and reason), as well as the psychoaesthetic autorefential lyricism and narcisistic autoelevation or discounted tragicomicality, but which also discovers for us the possibility of a narration through clusters of complexes of meanings, values and world views based on the verb, on inter-locutions, on

the rhetoric of a socially co-determined and enabling art form, revealing magical powers, exhibiting historical lacunas, pointing to alternative resolutions, a recompacting of a more fluid social bond, perhaps also a broader understanding of the nature role and function of written art.

To write about what no one has had the idea or possibility of writing about: one's silent history, one's non-Eurobourgeois heritage, one's hypereal border situation, one's social/existential concretization as a mobile threshold. No lyrical/metaphysical poem in a European language can do that, not any longer. And no Judeo-Christian, Graeco-Latin repertoire of symbols and mythemes can embody, represent, or be appropriate to the silent history, the mysterious echoes and beliefs and spiritual richness of the Caribbean. Unless, of course, the myse-en-abyme, the telluric challenge to those same Western models of creation and analysis are part and parcel of the attempt—the Event—to voice the difference of what has not yet been told . . . which brings us back to the necessity yet again to rethink, and invest in, allegories insofar as narrative accounts which require and create their own audience, except that here the reader cannot be passive: to register the other-speaking there's need for a focused consciousness, an imaginative predisposition, even a willingness to give oneself over to these previously non-existent values and situations. In the post-modern epoch, the alternative to the numbing avalanches of images and manipulable data bytes is to sit back, decompress so to speak, then listen, actively, and then after that attempt a response for which there is no precedent and there surely is no garantee. The "peoples" and the "nations" and the "selves" being createdrecounted in these new allegories are not of the Nation-State variety or the Freudian modality. They may evoke, of course, a réalisme merveilleux, a characteristic Haitian mode of expression, as in the works of Jacques Stéphen Alexis. <sup>28[28]</sup> The condition of the border crosser, of the mestizo, of the migrant: these cannot be spoken in a non-deictic, a-positional, non-thetic mode. 29[29] They require context and contention, e de-lineation of a ground, a mise-en-langage of a topos whose meaning and relevance must be created as it encounters and questions the models and the values that wouldn't allow it to come out for years, for generations. Even when what does come out, what is disclosed concerns more complicated silences, definitely more unsettling

<sup>28[28]</sup>Linking the mythical with the historical as a creative positive force, and with the Haitian legacy of the Americas as a whole, Alejo Carpentier finds *lo real maravilloso* "at every step in the lives of men for whom dates are recorded in the history of the Continent . . . from the seekers of the Fountain of Eternal Youth and the Golden City of Manoa, to certain rebels of the first hour or certain modern heroes of our wars of independence. . . . And the fact is that, because of its virgin landscape, its formation, its ontology; because of the Revelation its recent discovery constituted, the fertile crossbreedings it produced, America is far from having exhausted its wealth of mythologies" (Cit. in Webb 18).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29[29]</sup>Of course they can, as witness the flurry of publications gathering writings by Native Americans, Chicanas and other Latinos, and predictably a great many of these hybrid (or marginalized, or hyphenated, or translated) constructs exhibit simultaneously the atemporal, metaphysical questioning of the (High, Western) Tradition as well as the directness of the best engaged poetry. That leaves them open to the aesthetic charge of not meeting the unconsciously normative (and oppressive) parameters of any one single poetic theory or school. But that is what is intriguing in them, and that is what I have argued elsewhere (Carravetta 1995b) ought to be the locus from which to review and critique aesthetics and ethics and whatever else of both, the Grand Tradition and the local circumstances of the utterance.

reconsiderations on history and the (r)evolutions of societies. The case of Mexico is exemplary. 30[30]

Whether focused on a Primal—and Founding—Saying at the interface between nature and culture, or linguistically schizoid in wrestling out of the shadows of institutionalized tropes and types; whether prompting a chant of unheard (and unpleasant, and unsettling) Semantic Possibilities, reconfiguring temporalities and exacerbating differences in the clash between world-views<sup>31[31]</sup>—all of which, incidentally, inscribe and embody the Sentient, the Aesthetic, and the Memorable (as future histories if nothing else)—the reasons for a post-modern understanding of the allegorical are new, different, anti-metaphysical, non-semiotic, prone to (re)capture something akin to what another generation of critics called consciousness. Interpersonal unfolding of an event, a world, a predicated sense, a stating of one's position and situation which, unlike what happens with the rhetoric of lyric, in these concrete "generalized condition[s] of homelessness" (Said, "Reflections on Exile" 424), must always be negotiated. 32[32] In this view, the variable background lends itself not so much to travel writing as to the experience of writing the traveling itself, its meandering through misunderstandings, with flashes of success against constant tripping, tasting aloneness and tasting freedom, dwelling in the familiarity of strangeness, writing about the experience of moving, shifting, and perhaps finding something about oneself, one's belongingness, against the unpredictable opportunities offered through time (both chronometric and of memory), over broad discontinuous social spaces, deploying shards of new languages, wearing paraments and displaying icons of unpronounceable gods. Perhaps (re)write the essaying itself. In the age of photography, cinema, video, this writing is not faintly attempting to tell us what is being seen or what a given scene or event might actually be, or mean. Ethnography has dispelled that myth. 33[33] Knowledge whether scientific or aesthetic is relational, 34[34] and so travel writing too is bound up with the fluctuations of the borderlands, floating masks and amorphous constituencies, the allegorizing the passages of Hermes, his having left the Gods and Heroes of Olympus forever behind in order to reemerge, donning a myriad vestments, the metamorphosis of an-other writing:

### Between the Greek and African pantheon,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30[30]</sup>See the somber reflection by Richard Rodriguez: "I have come at last to Mexico, the country of my parents birth. I do not expect to find anything that pertains to me ... Mexico's tragedy is that she has no political idea of herself as rich as her blood" (52). On the different rules for understanding specific cultural icons, and some problems associated with grasping, expressing, representing them, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, see also Octavio Paz, who offers moreover a compelling portrait of La Malinche in the Mexican cultural unconscious.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31[31]</sup>This is particually evident in Native American Literature, for example in Silko, Alexei, Momaday, and Hogan.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32[32]</sup>See also Said's *Orientalism*, and the criticism it spawned.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33[33]</sup>I am referring mainly to selected texts by Rosaldo, Geertz, Crapanzano, Clifford and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34[34]</sup>Without going back to existential phenomenology, even from within a more "Anglo-American" critical context, the idea that the *episteme* must somehow relink with the *doxa*, with the space in-between, the gap taken up primarily by language itself, has been suggested and developed in illuminating ways. Most recently, see McCormick (142-43 et passim). But think also of the work of Richard Rorty, Stanley Rosen, Charles Taylor, Cornel West, Edward Said, Stanley Fish and others.

Lost animist, I rechristianed trees:
Caduceus of Hermes: the constrictor round the mangrove.
Dorade, their golden, mythological dolphin,
Leapt, flaking light, as once for Arion,
For the broken archipelago of wave-browed gods.
Now, the sibyl I honour, mother of memory,
Bears in her black hand a white frangipani, with berries of blood,
She gibbers with the cries
Of the Guinean odyssey.<sup>35[35]</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35[35]</sup>D. Walcott, "Origins," *Collected Poems* (12).

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