

BOOK REVIEW -

**What is interpretation for?
On Peter Carravetta's *Dei Parlanti***

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In an attempt to arrive at a question that would serve as the focal point of discussion of Professor Carravetta's latest book, *Dei Parlanti*, I thought of a number of possible titles, such as "of what use is interpretation," "how to interpret," and yes, even, "interpretation for dummies," the latter, which, of course, would make his book even more popular in its appeal to cultural ignorance, societal masochism, and lastly, but more importantly, in its appeal to the great American pragmatic spirit. But *Dei Parlanti* is not an American book, no value judgment intended in such a statement. It is a book, however, which returns to the continental philosophical tradition to ask some very important questions we have recently begun to forget. After some consideration, I thought that perhaps a more appropriate question might be "what is interpretation for?" or "what is rhetoric for?" following Heidegger's own title "What Are Poets For?" All of which brings together several important factors to our discussion tonight. Both Professor Valesio and Professor Carravetta, besides being critics and philosophers, are also poets. Both these thinkers before you here tonight, have not forgotten to ask the primordial questions—the question(s) if you will, of ontology. Which clearly, is also the question of origins. "Origin here mean that from and by which something is what it is as it is," writes Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. He continues: "What something is, as it is, we call its essence, or nature. The origin of something is the source of its nature...The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other." [PLT, 17].

The question of origins, of ontology is necessary for any philosophical discussion of rhetoric (and rhetorics) and interpretation. For to interpret always implies a movement towards, the reading of an artefact, of a Referent, as every referent must have both an origin and a destination. "The art work is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself..." [PLT, 19]. And it is in this space of the "something other than mere thingness" that interpretation is born. It is said that

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Heidegger returned to the pre-Socratics in his search to the question of the Being of beings, as one often speaks of a return to a previous intellectual tradition. But the word return is always problematic, because it implies the possibility of an actual return, and we all know that such a thing is not possible. In light of this, the title of Valesio's book, *Novantiqua*, captures I believe, the journey Valesio and Carravetta undertake, each in their own way. While Valesio "returns" to the question of rhetoric, Carravetta "returns" to the question of interpretation—and their answers though related, remain quite different. *Novantiqua* and *Dei Parlanti*, are again, returns to questions, not to answers.

Carravetta's chapter on Valesio, entitled *Valesio e la retorica dell'inducidibile*, or *Valesio and the Rhetoric of the Unsayable*, clearly elucidates the author's agreement with and difference from the subject of the chapter. Before I even knew that Professor Valesio was going to be here tonight, this was the chapter that I thought best characterized this complex and much needed book. As anyone familiar with academic philosophy in the United States well knows, what goes by the name of analytic philosophy is usually associated with British philosophy of language and symbolic logic, and Continental philosophy, with just about everything else from Western philosophy with roots in literature. What is striking about analytic philosophy is that despite the conclusion of one its most illustrious, revered founding fathers, Ludwig Wittgenstein, that logic was far from being the key to truth or knowledge, analytic philosophers have spent the last ninety years doing and believing in the kind of philosophy Wittgenstein said could not be done. Because Wittgenstein used logic to disprove the truths of logic--beyond language-- analytic philosophers felt they could stop there, with the employment of a symbolic sign system. Yet, as it is often stated, and not without justification, there are two Wittgensteins. One, the Wittgenstein of *The Philosophical Investigations*, i.e, the latter Wittgenstein, who responds to the Wittgenstein of *The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in an effort to escape from the solipsism of the first book. And then, there is the early, more radical Wittgenstein, who declares philosophy dead, two decades after Nietzsche had declared God dead. This is the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, who concludes with the sentence: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"; it is the mystical Wittgenstein, or better stated, the Wittgenstein for whom whatever can be known about the world known can only be known through language, and anything outside of language is *inducidibile*, un-sayable, inaccessible, and belongs to the mystical. Nietzsche had already said as much in the nineteenth century, when in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he asserted that the categories of metaphysics were categories of language. But where Nietzsche saw a new beginning for philosophy, Wittgenstein saw the end of it.

In some sense, then, Valesio and Carravetta, both offer their own response to

Wittgenstein. For Valesio that response comes by way of rhetoric. As with all great critics and philosophers, the choice of such a concept, is not innocent. Rhetoric works for Valesio, because it allows (what Deleuze called) a-signifying language to share a space with signification; because it allows poetry, philosophy, and rhetoric to co-exist. In *Novantiqua*, Valesio writes:

Rhetoric is not even confined to consciously intended discourse: anything that is structured as a discourse is grammatically acceptable...Thus any automatic, non-consciously-controlled discourse that is at least partly intelligible within a natural language is a proper object of rhetorical analysis; and this includes the discourses of persons talking in their sleep, or while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, or in states of temporary or permanent mental unbalance.... [N, 17].

Valesio's rhetoric, in other words, embraces even what Wittgenstein called the *non-sense* of philosophy and mysticism: as a starting point and not as an end. That is why, as Carravetta does well to point out, Wittgenstein's *non-sense* becomes *il silenzio* in Valesio's theory. "Nel senso che il silenzio, oltrech  contenere quello 'che non si pu  dire..." Sense and silence are not exclusive categories of language. "Infatti," comments Carravetta, "parlare del silenzio   paradossale, [ma] non contraddittorio." For anyone who didn't get the John Cage message in 4'33" some years earlier, Simon & Garfunkle finally put it in a popular song at the end of 1960s: that indeed silence had a sound, and that one could listen to silence. A conclusion, with which Valesio, will most likely agree. The realm of the mystical allows for such silence, for such non-signification, and by extension, and the same could be said of rhetoric. Fairly or unfairly, at least in this culture, one often hears the word "rhetoric" used to underplay, undermine, or devalue either a statement, or a question. In common parlance, a statement like "X is pure rhetoric" really means X is an unsubstantiated statement or X is a statement that lacks meaning, or X is a statement that does not follow the rules of logic. In short, then, "X is pure rhetoric" is meant to devalue the statement. But poetry does not have to adhere to logic or to reason, and neither does rhetoric in Valesio's sense. What, however, cannot exist without conceptual thought is philosophy; and here is where Carravetta's view of interpretation comes in, and where rhetoric and philosophy part ways.

It would be a mistake to interpret Wittgenstein's term of "non-sense" as a value judgment. When Wittgenstein says that the vast majority of philosophical statements are "non-sense" what he means to say is that they are statements about supposedly extra-linguistic realities (e.g., essence, substance, primary, secondary qualities, and

forms), as though such a thing were possible. But for the Viennese philosopher, there is no getting beyond language. Philosophy's only limit is language. What kind of language? Language that does not signify. Non-sense. And if language cannot mean...ostensibly...or by referring to its own sign system, silence is its only response. Fortunately for us, however, philosophy did not end with Wittgenstein, and subsequent philosophers opted to study a "dead" discipline rather than become window cleaners or carpenters. Philosophy continued to do what it had always done—that is, to create concepts. After many years of doing philosophy, Deleuze returned to philosophy to ask himself the question: What is philosophy? To which he answered: The difference between philosophy, art, and science, is that philosophy is the only one of those general disciplines, which has the creation of concepts as its primary goal. And concepts belong to neither the un-sayable, nor to silence, but instead to the said, to signification. It is here, then, that I would place Carravetta's *Dei Parlanti*. Without negating Valesio's *signifying silence* or vision of rhetoric, Carravetta brings interpretation to it, and bridges the gap between philosophy and rhetoric in a *retorica dell'interpretare*.

To be involved with rhetoric and with philosophy at the beginning of the twenty-first century is to be involved with the question of knowledge. But what constitutes knowledge for the poet might be quite different from what constitutes knowledge for the critic or the philosopher. While the schizophrenic ramblings of Artaud might constitute knowledge for the poet, for the analytic philosopher—and the analytic philosopher does count even if we don't like him—Artaud's rambling may count as "poetry" but not as knowledge. Philosophy, whether analytic, continental, Eastern, or otherwise, must account for its concepts.

Postmodern thought tells us, and of course, this is an over-simplification, that knowledge and Truth have come to an end. If that is so, what is there to interpret? What is philosophy for? Why posit at this time in history a hermeneutic circle, as does Carravetta in *Dei Parlanti*? To speak of the creation of a work of art, of an interpreter, and an interpretation, isn't this to deny what everybody else has been saying for so long? That is, that there is no longer anything to interpret? If as Nietzsche so well put it, we had wiped away the Horizon, the Referent, what could we possibly interpret? In a world in constant flux (defined by becoming as opposed to Being) interpretation itself can only be provisional, which begs the obvious question: why even attempt it? The death of God was co-extensive with the death of ontology. And yet here we have two thinkers, each in their own way, responding to that death, one ontically, the other ontologically, to use the Heideggerian terms. Are their projects politically re-active or

not? Can rhetoric and interpretation be considered *contemporary* theory? Are they following the lines of the rhizome, or are they digging for deep roots, merely because they are roots and merely because they're deep. To borrow Valesio's term, where does a *novantiqua* philosophy of rhetorical interpretation lead to, politically—to Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard, etc., or somewhere else. Carravetta's *Dei Parlanti* deals with all these thinkers in a highly original way while providing its own set of answers and theory. Carravetta has written a rich, complex book that asks the kinds of questions so many of us are glad are still being asked.

Works Cited

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