



Beauty and/(n)or Truth: A (Hermeneutic) Rhetoric of the Aesthetic

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“Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –,” a line of poetry by the nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson can be used as a signpost for this article, which attempts a hermeneutic regress from the postmodern to the archaic, in search of a rhetoric for the aesthetic. In this textual tour, some of the master narratives of our culture examining various versions of the story of beauty and truth are visited, and more specifically (always in backward motion), the work of the postmodern theorists Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, the German philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger, the English Romantic poet John Keats, the Greek philosophers Plato and Parmenides, and, last but not least, the Greek poet Sappho.

Paul de Man, the “sad” patriarch of postmodernism, who engaged deeply with the cardinal problem of the truth of poetry and its relation to reality, contests that all language is figurative and rhetorical, and hence unable to represent the real. De Man demystifies aesthetics exploding a whole tradition of aesthetic theory based on the ontology of language, that is, the relation between “word” and “thing.” Along the same lines, the deconstructive critique of Jacques Derrida supports that linguistic figurality contaminates not only literature but philosophy as well, playing mimetic games of seduction that limit reality to a textual frame. On the far side of deconstruction, the hermeneutic theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger give figurality an overwhelming power by establishing a rhetoric of ontology and presence. Heidegger’s radical reformulation of truth as *aletheia* and its conjunction with beauty, not only reflects the romantic identification of “beauty is truth,” as best expressed by the poet John Keats, but also points back to Plato who “aporetically” devoted a lifetime to a search for the beautiful and the true, coming up with multiple and contradictory views. As we move into archaic times, the whispering voice of Parmenides unexpectedly recommends the rhetoric of persuasion as the way to truth, while Sappho, celebrating presence and union, employs an erotic rhetoric that names not only human, but natural and divine encounters of beauty and truth.

Keywords: beauty, truth, rhetoric, aesthetics, hermeneutics, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, John Keats, Plato, Sappho

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth’s superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind –
 Emily Dickinson (c. 1868)

“Why is it that the furthest-reaching truths about ourselves and the world have to be stated in such lopsided, referentially indirect mode? Or, to be more specific, why is it that texts that attempt the articulation of

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epistemology with persuasion turn out to be inconclusive about their own intelligibility?" (De Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* 52). In his violent critique of what he calls the "aesthetic ideology," that is the vision of poetry as actually bringing about the ultimate fusion of form and content, subject and object, Paul de Man, the "sad" patriarch of postmodernism, argues instead that literary texts (as much as philosophical ones) become exemplary of the conflictual character of language.¹ Hence, the conflict in rhetoric² precludes our understanding literature essentially as art, that is, as the harmonious interpenetration of substance and form. Rhetoric thus makes a problem out of art, or the aesthetic, insofar as the notion of the aesthetic is predicated upon the harmony of part and whole,³ self and other, man and nature.

"Rhetoric" is, of course, the classical term for the art of persuasion. De Man is concerned with the theory of "tropes" which accompanies rhetorical utterances. Engaged deeply with the cardinal problem of the truth of poetry and its relation to reality,⁴ he contests that figures of speech (tropes), by allowing writers to say one thing but mean something else, pervade language, exerting a force which destabilizes logic and thereby denies the possibility of a straightforwardly literal or referential use of language. De Man considers that it is the effect of language and rhetoric which prevents a direct representation of the real. He follows Nietzsche⁵ in believing that language is essentially figurative and not expressive, supporting that there is no original unrhetorical language. This means that reference is always contaminated with figurality. What emerges is disfiguration: disfiguration names the impossibility, constituent with the status of language as rhetoric or figure, of fixing a sign's referential status.

Speaking of the rhetorical structure and tropological patterns of all texts in "our modernity,"⁶ de Man has no reservation to pronounce language as "guilty of aestheticism" (*Aesthetic Ideology* 48). What de Man undertakes to do is to demystify aesthetics by revealing the textual blind spots in both literature and philosophy, since aesthetics seems to confuse linguistic and natural reality and thus short-circuits paying attention to a text's full rhetorical complexity. The desire for *con-fusing* the word and the thing is the chief form of aesthetic mystification which de Man sets out to deconstruct. De Man's theory is thus

¹ If we think of "metaphor" as the essence or paradigm unit of literariness and rhetoricity we can turn to I.A. Richards or Paul Ricoeur, who have given us revealing analyses of this linguistic paradox: "In the simplest formulation, when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction" (Richards 51).

² "In order that a metaphor obtains, one must continue to identify the previous incompatibility through the new compatibility. The predicative assimilation involves, in that way, a specific kind of tension which is not so much between a subject and a predicate as between semantic incongruence and congruence. The insight into likeness is the perception of the conflict between the previous incompatibility and the new compatibility. 'Remoteness' is preserved within 'proximity.' To see the like is to see the same in spite of, and through, the different. The tension between sameness and difference characterizes the logical structure of likeness. Imagination, accordingly, is the ability to produce new kinds by assimilation and to produce them not above the differences, as in the concept, but in spite of and through the differences." (Ricoeur 234)

³ "Aesthetics, what we call or think of as aesthetics, is the working of the metaphysics of presence with respect to art and beauty." (Bernstein 82)

⁴ "It is Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) who provides the first extended philosophical treatment of metaphor. Aristotle describes metaphor, under the art of poetry, as a means by which the poet provides knowledge through artistic imitation (mimesis), and again, under the art of rhetoric, as having a philosophically significant role in the making of persuasive arguments. In both cases metaphor is a powerful means of achieving insight." (Johnson 5)

⁵ "Nietzsche (1844-1900) carries this Romantic affirmation of the figurative origins of language to even greater heights. He refuses to separate metaphor from 'proper words' and sees metaphorical understanding as pervasive in human thought and speech, i.e., as essential to all knowledge. He describes the 'creator of language' as one who designates the relations of things to men by the use of daring metaphors. Metaphor is not merely a linguistic entity, but rather a process by which we encounter our world." (Johnson 15)

⁶ "Further, to the extent to which post-aesthetic philosophies of art conceive of art as having suffered a loss, the past is projected from the state of alienation as a time when art and truth were not in discordance, when they were united or in harmony. Thus, every conception of the alienation of art from truth is simultaneously a work of remembrance, a work of mourning and grief, even for those philosophers who doubt that such an 'original' state of union ever existed. In modernity beauty is not only alienated from truth, but grieves its loss; modernity is the site of beauty bereaved – bereaved of truth." (Bernstein 4)

opposed to traditional aesthetics, and his deconstructive rhetoric or rhetorical criticism, whose effects extend into the realm of contemporary cultural politics, is an open attack on the aesthetic ideology. For de Man, rhetoric or persuasion is the primary function of linguistic utterance, devoid of any value as presentation of truth. Rhetorical analysis, shunning aesthetics and metaphysics, shows reference to be impossible. Thus rhetoric names emptiness and absence, and poetic meaning lies precisely in its non-coincidence with itself, *speaking otherwise* (*allos agoreuein*). In this sense, allegory names the essential duplicity of all literature. What is more, allegory models all forms of figuration and indirectness as the essence of language.

De Man's "rhetoric of temporality" attempts to explode a whole tradition of aesthetic theory based on the ontology of language, that is the idea that language (especially the language of poetry) partakes of an organic continuity with objects and processes in the natural world. De Man calls this tendency a "romantic nostalgia," characterizes it, as we have seen, as "aesthetic ideology," and chooses it as a space of practising his rhetorical approach to literature, the "rhetoric of Romanticism": "At times, romantic thought and romantic poetry seem to come so close that it becomes difficult to distinguish between object and image, between imagination and perception, between an expressive or constitutive and a mimetic or literal language" (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* 7). De Man traces the "origin" of aesthetic ideology to the Romantic period, and links it especially to the validation of "symbol" which is "founded on an intimate unity between the image that rises up before the senses and the supersensory totality that the image suggests," that is, "the classical idea of a unity between incarnate and ideal beauty" (*Blindness and Insight* 189). For de Man, the very rhetoric of Romanticism ultimately betrays the "symbol" and exposes the defeat of a language hopelessly aimed at plenitude of meaning and truth-to-experience. Poetry thus read, slowly and closely, tells us the truth, but its own and that of our condition. The truth emerging is precisely the true nature of literature as "fiction." Presence is the presence of nothingness, literary language names the void, and poetic consciousness is essentially divided, sorrowful, and tragic.

De Man's argument gets at a truth about all literature: that its conventions of reflexivity are themselves mimetic of the kind of unreal reality that modern reality has become.⁷ Unreality in this sense is not a fiction but the element in which we live. And its mode of utterance is "rhetoric." Since rhetoric is internally cleaved between a tropological system and a technique of persuasion, it has a tradition of double identity, pertaining historically both to eloquence and to a collection of tropes, enhancing the rhetorical force of language in its delusive appeal. The art of persuasion constitutes an infinite chain of figurative words which have no extralinguistic origin or end. Hence, fiction (that is language) seduces us into the truth of "untruth." Persuasion is the form of seduction, and rhetoric is the art of persuasion. This amounts to a claim that language mimics what it is about; the mingling of mimetic and figurative is characteristic of all language, de Man proclaims.

In a similar way, Jacques Derrida's questioning of the distinction between speech and writing is paralleled by his interrogation into "philosophy" and "literature," and hence into the "literal" and the "figurative." In Derrida's view, philosophy can only be philosophical if it ignores or denies its own figurality, believing that it stands at a remove from linguistic contamination. Derrida in effect makes philosophy a genre of archi-literature. The best evidence for this deconstructive inversion comes from the Derridean cohabitation of philosophical and literary texts. For instance, "[b]y placing together an extract from Plato's *Philebus*, in which the internal contradictions of the notion of *mimesis* are already evident ... and Mallarmé's short prose-poem '*Mimique*,' which stages those contradictions, Derrida is dramatizing the hold which this essentially philosophical notion – which he terms mimetologism – has had over literature since its beginnings" (*Acts of Literature* 127). What Derrida is trying to prove through such "marriages" is that if serious language is a special case of the non-serious, if truths are fictions whose fictionality has been forgotten, then literature is not a deviant, parasitical instance of language but its very "essence."

⁷ "Modernity is the separation of spheres, the becoming autonomous of truth, beauty and goodness from one another, and their developing into self-sufficient forms of practice: modern science and technology, private morality and modern legal forms, and modern art. This categorial separation of domains represents the dissolution of the metaphysical totalities of the pre-modern age." (Bernstein 5-6)

We read in “*Mimique*”:

This – “The scene illustrates but the idea, not any actual action, in a hymen (out of which flows Dream), tainted with vice yet sacred, between desire and fulfilment, perpetration and remembrance That is how the Mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion ...: he thus sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction.” (*Acts of Literature* 130)

Figure is the battleground between reference and the deconstruction of reference, embodying mimesis and imploding it.⁸ Such a heuristic figure is for Derrida the Greek word “hymen,” the anatomical obstruction/passage to female sexuality:

“Hymen” ... is first of all a sign of fusion, the consummation of a marriage, the identification of two beings, the confusion between two”; contrariwise, in hymen, “It is not only the difference (between desire and fulfilment) that is abolished, but also the difference between difference and non-difference. Non-presence, the gaping void of desire, and presence, the fullness of enjoyment, amount to the same.” (*Acts of Literature* 161).

Playing around with his “hymen,” Derrida “teases” us, floating between a symbolist aesthetic which collapses ontological distinctions, and a deconstructive rhetoric avowing that signs are always “empty” in so far as their meaning necessarily eludes any instance of assured, self-present grasp: “The referent is lifted, but reference remains: what is left is only the writing of dreams, a fiction that is not imaginary, mimicry without imitation, without verisimilitude, without truth or falsity” (*Acts of Literature* 163).

One striking feature of Derrida’s response to literary texts is its predominantly affirmative mode. What Derrida describes as the Nietzschean “affirmation,” the joyous affirmation of the free play of a world without truth, becomes apparent in his fascinating discussion of Maurice Blanchot’s *La folie du jour*, where the aesthetic is gendered as feminine, in a “random claim that links affirmation usually to women, beautiful ones, it is then more than probable that, as long as they say *yes, yes*, I am a woman and beautiful. I am a woman, and beautiful” (*Acts of Literature* 245). What we witness here is Derrida’s curious equation between woman, sexuality, justice, and the swerve from logic to figurative language. “The law is in the feminine. She is not a woman (it is only a figure, a ‘silhouette,’ and not a representative of the law) but she, *la loi*, is in the feminine, declined in the feminine; not only as a grammatical gender” (*Acts of Literature* 247). Derrida invites us to consider a truth that is irrational as well as prescriptive: “Let us be attentive to this syntax of truth ... she, truth One cannot conceive truth without the madness of the law” (*Acts of Literature* 250).

Investigating “The Question of Truth as it Emerges in the Experience of Art,” in the First Part of his monumental work *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer introduces a critique of the cognitive theory that lets itself be restricted to a scientific concept of truth only. Hence his study of hermeneutics, which starts from the experience of art, seeks to present the hermeneutic phenomenon as primarily an aesthetic experience of truth that must not only be justified philosophically, but which is itself a mode of philosophizing. According to Gadamer, the aesthetic is a moment of the hermeneutic awareness, the moment that allows us to be claimed by the artwork as art. Essential to the understanding of the artwork is a movement toward self-understanding in the interpreter. Since self-understanding does not take place in a vacuum but involves attaining true beliefs about one’s self and situation, hermeneutics speaks about the truth, in the large sense of the term, manifested in art. Aesthetics, Gadamer proclaims, has to be transformed into hermeneutics.

⁸ “Mimesis, thus determined, aims at making present; it is governed by a certain demand for presence, even though the very structure of mimesis is such as to preclude the possibility of full presence. Correspondingly, the ancient axiomatics of mimesis is governed by a privileging of presence: the positive value of mimesis lies in its capacity to present, to bring the original to presence; its negative value derives from its incapacity to bring that original fully to presence, from the necessity of leaving the original also withdrawn, to some extent concealed.” (Sallis, *Double Truth* 187)

Gadamer's hermeneutics moves away from the assumption, "we find the truth," to the notion, "truth finds us." This presupposes our surrender to "play," and especially the play of art: "I select as my starting-point a notion that has a major role in aesthetics: the concept of play" (91). Gadamer chooses the art form that best expresses his hermeneutic stance, that of "drama" as befitting the central issue of his hermeneutic philosophy: the linguisticity of understanding. Nominating the tragic as "a basic aesthetic phenomenon" (114), granting the spectator a "new insight from the illusion in which he lives," Gadamer equates the encounter with the tragic logos to "an encounter with self" (118). In what could be called a hermeneutical poetics, for Gadamer, the nature of experience is linguistic. "Being that can be understood is language" (432), says Gadamer in a phrase that has become the emblem of his thesis. Professing that the human world is "basically linguistic in nature" (401), Gadamer establishes a rhetoric of presence, that is, a rhetoric of ontology, which gives figurality an overwhelming power:⁹

A symbol not only points to something, but it represents, in that it takes the place of something. But to take the place of something means to make something present that is not present. Thus, the symbol takes the place of something in representing: that is, it makes something immediately present. Only because the symbol presents in this way the presence of what it represents, is it treated with the reverence due to that which it symbolizes. (136)

Establishing the ontology of the literary sign, that is, viewing figuration as the root of authenticity, is Martin Heidegger's modern version of a rhetoric of truth which revives old traditions. Exploding de Man's distinction of the contradictory function of symbol and allegory, he conjoins the two terms in a single performance:

The art work is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than the mere thing itself is, *allo agoreuei*. The work makes something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made. To bring together is, in Greek, *sumballein*. The work is a symbol. (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 19–20)

In his radical essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," as well as elsewhere, Heidegger introduces a crucial re-direction of philosophy, resting on counterposing propositional truth with another kind of truth, *aletheia*, as disclosure. Heidegger helps us see poetic language as the place where "the happening of truth," that is, the revelation of what is within the establishment and preservation of a human being's world, can be most clearly grasped.

Rejecting the traditional distinction that assigns truth to logic and beauty to aesthetics¹⁰ – "But until now art presumably has had to do with the beautiful and beauty, and not with truth" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 36) – Heidegger reformulates the Platonic metaphysics granting it a historical temporality: "This shining, joined in the work, is the beautiful. *Beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness*" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 56). A happening of truth, though, that is unquestionably linguistic: "All art, as the letting happen of the advent of truth of what is, is, as such, essentially *poetry*" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 72). For Heidegger, the metaphoric literary sign records a mode of thinking more rigorous than

⁹ "Imagination is this stage in the production of genres where generic kinship has not reached the level of conceptual peace and rest but remains caught in the war between distance and proximity, between remoteness and nearness. In that sense, we may speak with Gadamer of the fundamental metaphoricity of thought to the extent that the figure of speech that we call 'metaphor' allows us a glance at the general procedure by which we produce concepts. This is because in the metaphoric process the movement toward the genus is arrested by the resistance of the difference and, as it were, intercepted by the figure of rhetoric." (Ricoeur 234–35)

¹⁰ "Heidegger's interest in art is not limited to the problem of aesthetic appreciation. In fact, this interest, which spans the major part of his career, informs his criticism of the traditional concept of truth as a correspondence, which provides the foundation for modern knowledge and aesthetics. Heidegger's contribution to Continental philosophy is inseparable from a new understanding of truth, which can be linked to a hermeneutical approach to art as a revelatory concern." (Melaney 26)

the conceptual, because it always shows forth its revealing within the existential frame of humanity. Thus, poetic language cannot be described merely as some linguistic deviation from ordinary language. It is precisely the rhetorical function of language that shows forth the human being's grasp of its own existence in the world. Heidegger, as a modern prophet and rhetorician, dispels the notion of language as communication and attributes to it an inaugurating function: "[l]anguage, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 73). Poetry discloses Being and produces truth.

Heidegger's aesthetics (based on a Greek aesthetification of life) validates the interpretation of art as that which makes it possible for the human being to know itself, to represent itself. This means that language constitutes the aesthetic horizon, in the form of a tradition of interpretation.¹¹ The individual poem or work of art opens up a past, a present and a future in terms which grant a new experience of ourselves and the real. In one aspect, tradition conceals truth by preserving only deadened truths, thereby blocking off in forgetfulness all primordial and authentic origins. Yet, in another aspect, tradition offers a way back to the founding and inaugurating moments of Being and truth. "Truth is the truth of Being. Beauty does not occur alongside and apart from this truth. When truth sets itself into the work, it appears. Appearance – as this being of truth in the work and as work – is beauty"; engrafting ontology into aesthetics, Heidegger adds: "In the way in which, for the world determined by the West, that which is, is as the real, there is concealed a peculiar confluence of beauty with truth. The history of the nature of Western art corresponds to the change of the nature of truth" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 81).

"'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" presents a crucial conjunction of Romantic aesthetics¹² and hermeneutic politics, correlating in one form the production and consumption of art. As a verbal construct that interprets a plastic object that represents a ritualistic ceremony, the poem integrates into "one" the linguistic, artistic, and mythical configurations towards "being," thus holding together by a unity of meaning the diversity of rhetorical, aesthetic, and ethical parameters. A hermeneutic chain is formed as the linguistic sign "speaks" the artistic "image," which has "looked" at the procedures of the original erotic and religious acts. The poem suggests that all types of civilization – institutions as well as works of art – form a hermeneutic chain displaying modes of truth.

The nineteenth-century elevation of art to the status of a surrogate religion¹³ rested on the condition of the Romantic glorification of the creative imagination.¹⁴ The Romantic definition of a poem as an autonomous individual or system can be seen to originate from Kant's account of the aesthetic experience as set apart from ordinary knowledge and from Schiller's development of that account into a description

¹¹ "Heidegger's hermeneutical conception of the world in his discussion of art has important implications for aesthetics. Emphasis on the activity of the world replaces the role generally assigned to the spectator in modern aesthetics. A receptive witness to the disclosure of truth as an artistic phenomenon is not equivalent to the aesthetic subject who judges or reflects according to a canon of taste. It might be objected that aesthetics, properly considered, has nothing to do with the question of truth, but that the question of beauty constitutes its chief concern. Heidegger, however, challenges the conventional wisdom that seeks to deprive art of its relationship to truth." (Melaney 33)

¹² "Keats isolates a crucial aspect of Winckelmann's legacy (and it is Winckelmann's legacy, rather than the legacy of Greece): the aesthetic. Ironically, this aspect has often been confused with Keats's poetry, as if his poetry were merely its exemplar. A poem that makes use of the aesthetic as both its subject matter and its means of reflection on that subject matter is not saying the same thing twice, particularly not when the reflection takes the form of granting speech to an object that can neither speak nor be seen except by reifying the language of the poem's description." (Ferris xiv)

¹³ "Like Arnold, Ruskin had a firm sense that art has moral and political significance. To give it that significance, though, he had first to insist on the sacral quality of aesthetic perception and then also give that sacral quality a specific theological and historical meaning." (Loesberg 35)

¹⁴ "One of the basic illusions of Romantic Ideology is that only a poet and his works can transcend a corrupting appropriation by 'the world' of politics and money. Romantic poetry 'argues' this (and other) illusions repeatedly, and in this process it 'suffers' the contradictions of its own illusions and the arguments it makes for them. The readers of such works can benefit from them by turning this experiential and aesthetic level of understanding into a self-conscious and critical one." (McGann13)

of aesthetic experience as a harmonious whole in which sense and reason encounter one another.¹⁵ This new aesthetics and poetics opened new dimensions and produced new tasks for hermeneutic thought. From now on hermeneutics concerned itself with the idea of the author as creator and of the work of art as an expression of his creative self. In alliance with the poets and philosophers of the period, the hermeneutic thinkers advanced the conception of the organic unity of a work, and adhered to a concept of the symbolic nature of art. Equally important to the ideas of the new aesthetics was the transcendental turn hermeneutic thinking underwent in the hands of Romantic theorists. For Schleiermacher, the founder of hermeneutic philosophy, the art of understanding is the re-experiencing of the mental processes of the text's author. It is the reverse of composition, for it starts with the fixed and finished expression and goes back to the mental life from which it arose.¹⁶ With its spatial image, the hermeneutical circle precisely suggests an area of comprehensive understanding. Since communication is a dialogical relation, there is assumed, at the outset, a community of meaning shared by the speaker and the listener.

The initial attempt to *de-code* the urn's meaning is made through the rhetorical route of using three metaphors: the urn is "bride," "child," and "historian." The nuptial image of the opening line gives its place to the procreative one of "foster-child." "Silence" and "slow time" are not only the condition that allowed the initial creation of the artistic object by its plastic creator, but the context of its hermeneutic *re-cognition* by the poet-reader. The urn is the field of awareness in which "forms" are situated, an open dimension of heightened consciousness, a *templum* that the poet has entered. As Keats exemplifies in his letters, "the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth" (1:192).

My argument would be that the poem traces a transformative inversion of mental aggression or "rape," in that the hermeneutic dialogue or, more precisely, the hermeneutic violation intended by the poet-reader in order to capture aesthetic knowledge ultimately becomes violation suffered, as the "still unravished bride" finally "teases" the wilful assailant out of himself, out of his will: "Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity." The "flowery tale" and "leaf-fring'd legend" that "haunts about" the urn's shape seems to employ a rhetoric of seduction and persuasion whose fictionality transports the viewer into the heart of metaphysics. In the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" Keats is twice removed from the original event, placing himself in the role of an interpreter of an interpreter, in an aesthetic distance, not only historical but also formal. His reading of the urn's text, however, points towards the potentiality inherent in the cultural form, the art object, to both contain and transmit the authentic experience that brought it into being, a frozen "competence" – "Cold Pastoral" – that, given the appropriate receiver (or perceiver), may unfreeze into the released flow of "performance." Keats' Romantic hermeneutics results in the celebrated pronouncement of "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'" which repeats the Platonic identification of ontology and aesthetics, that is, it points towards a unitary politics of "being."¹⁷

¹⁵ "The Greek view of art as essentially mimetic remained effective throughout much of the history of metaphysics. Yet, at least by the time of Kant, of romanticism, and of German idealism, this classical concept seems to have lost much of its force and to have given way to an approach that focuses on the creativity of the artist, on the natural poetic genius, rather than on the talent for fashioning mimetic reproductions of nature. Thus, Kant draws the contrast in the Critique of Judgment: 'Everyone is agreed that genius is to be wholly opposed to the spirit of mimesis ...'. In romanticism the corresponding contrast between genius and talent becomes virtually a commonplace." (Sallis, Double Truth 171)

¹⁶ "Metaphor is the dreamwork of language and, like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator. The interpretation of dreams requires collaboration between a dreamer and a waker, even if they be the same person; and the act of interpretation is itself as much a creative endeavour as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules." (Davidson 200)

¹⁷ "Although the internal complexity of a poem such as Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" may be aestheticized into the traditional history of our relation to Greece, this very complexity cautions against such a move. Keats's earlier sonnets on Grecian topics already reflect a more complex relation to Greece. As with the urn, his relation explores the discrepancy between conceptual understanding (in the form of knowledge and history) and the resources of poetic language. Out of this discrepancy, the question of Greece returns as the question of its freedom from a modernity that would espouse and also reject it for the same reason: its tyranny over subsequent history." (Ferris xiv)

Plato, of course, begins his investigation into the nature of the “beautiful” by setting his protagonist, Socrates, in his normal mood of “*aporia*.” Entering into what appears to be an everyday conversation – but what is in fact a rigorous dialectical procedure – with the young Sophist newly arrived at Athens, “Hippias, the beautiful and wise!” (*Greater Hippias* 281a), Socrates, professing confusion and ignorance to distinguish between ugly and beautiful things, puts to his interlocutor the overwhelming question: “Come now, can you tell me what beauty is?” (286d). His conclusion only suggests the endless and complex quest after beauty that holds such a central, if ambiguous, position in Platonic thought: “I think now I appreciate the true meaning of the proverb, ‘All that is beautiful is difficult’” (304e).

By the time we come to the *Phaedrus*, Plato has transformed “the philosopher from a seeker after wisdom into one who is in possession of truth” (Wolz 188) – a truth that combines ontology with psychology, setting the aesthetic experience apart from ordinary knowledge, as a philosophical pursuit after the Ideas motivated by *eros* – the attraction to the physical beauty of the beloved. The erotic metaphysics of *Phaedrus* paints for us that “place beyond the heavens” where “Beauty it was ours to see in all its brightness in those days when, amidst that happy company, we beheld with our eyes that blessed vision ... for beauty alone this has been ordained, to be most manifest to sense and most lovely of them all.” (250b-d)

In the *Symposium*, the correlation of the erotic and the aesthetic is strengthened with Plato’s analytical account of the signification of *eros* as the soul’s desire for transcendent beauty: “Love is the love of beauty” (201a). The role attributed to Eros, as an intermediary daemon between the human and the divine, has precisely the characteristics of the god Hermes who is interpreter, messenger, thief, liar, contriver – revealing the dual nature of language and its hermeneutic/seductive function. Conceived on the day of Aphrodite’s birth, Eros, the son of Resource and Need, partakes of his mother’s poverty and destitution; “But, secondly, he brings his father’s resourcefulness to his designs upon the beautiful and the good, for he is gallant, impetuous, and energetic, a mighty hunter, and a master of device and artifice – at once desirous and full of wisdom, a lifelong seeker after truth, an adept in sorcery, enchantment, and seduction” (202d-203d). In the *Symposium*, the famous erotic ascent of the ladder from physical to metaphysical beauty generates a rhetoric of revelation expressed by Diotima: “And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for” (210d –211c).

It is when Plato comes in the *Republic* to turn a philosophical treatise into an educational system, that what seemed to be a solid aesthetic, ontological, and ethical union, is blown to pieces, and truth, beauty, art, philosophy and poetry are estranged, following their solitary routes. The battle of discourses¹⁸ begins in a mild way in Book III, where there is a hint to the instructive value of art. The political role of the aesthetic is clearly defined in “Do you not agree, then, that ... the end and consummation of culture is the love of the beautiful” (403c). The divorce of beauty and truth,¹⁹ or rather of “beauty” and “beauties,” is hinted at in Book V (276b). In Book VI a total segregation of artistic beauty and philosophical beauty/truth is effected along the lines that we would today call the distinction between high art and mass culture (493e-494a). When we come to the crucial Book X, and the long-delayed question is asked concerning the relation of art and truth, “art’s propensity for presenting falsehood in beautiful and persuasive ways” (Hyland 183) seems to be an unquestionable doctrine: “Consider, then, this very point. To which is painting directed in every case, to the imitation of reality as it is or of appearance as it appears? Is it an imitation of a phantasm or of the truth? Of a phantasm, he said” (598b). Consequently, “we must know the truth, that we can admit no poetry into our city save only hymns to the gods and the praises of

¹⁸ “Thus, these discourses have an astonishingly modern ring and are far removed from the mysticism which has been traditionally associated with Plato’s conception of love. For they address themselves to men who believe that whatever the conditions in which circumstances beyond their control have thrown them, they are in important respects responsible for their own modes of being. And they achieve that self-realization not by leaving the human experience behind and seeking refuge in another-worldly mysticism, but by inquiring into the real possibilities which it has to offer and by joining with others in a common effort to bring them to fruition.” (Wolz 282-83)

¹⁹ “For Plato, on the other hand, truth is clearly worth more than art. Yet in the Dialogues the relation between art and truth cannot be called a discord, although a division does obtain between them. In the *Republic* (Bks. III and X) Plato interprets art as mimesis and criticizes it because of its distance from the Ideas (*eidei*). Porro ara pou tou alethous he mimetike estin: ‘art is far away from the truth’ (*Rep.* 598b; NI, 216). But not hopelessly far.” (Krell 382)

goodmen” (607a). Anticipating the rhetorical force of poetic language,²⁰ the guardians of the Republic should have a ready argument to oppose to the protest of the banished poetry: “And let us further say to her, lest she condemn us for harshness and rusticity, that there is from of old a quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (607b).²¹ The Platonic rhetoric of temporality persuades art of its own hybridity. Relegating problems of fictionality, rhetoricity and nonseriousness to a marginal realm – a realm in which language can be as irresponsible as it likes because it is severed from truth – Plato already introduces the Derridean notion of poetry as parasitic.

But what about a rhetoric of truth? Where poetry and thinking can belong together in the same place; that is, prior to their formal reduction as literature and philosophy.²² Prior to their logical construction as modes or institutions of discourse, poetry and thinking already confront each other, are exposed to each other. What sort of happening is this? What is the site or event of poetry and thinking? What does this mutual exposure entail? What are its political consequences? These are the basic questions of a Platonic, or better Pre-Socratic, rhetoric,²³ collapsing the distinction between philosophical, scientific, theological and poetic discourse. We already read in Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides*: “You assert, in your poem, that all is one, and for this you advance admirable proofs” (128a-b).

In our hermeneutic regress from the postmodern to the archaic in search of a rhetoric for the aesthetic, we need to stop at Parmenides’ poem²⁴ in the beginning of philosophy²⁵ where, after a detailed account of the way of access to the goddess’s sanctuary, we hear the words of the goddess herself, the goddess-truth, revealing the “Way of Truth”²⁶ and the “Way of Seeming.” The male philosopher in quest

²⁰ “It is one of the ironies of history that Plato (428/27-348/47 B.C.), the master of metaphor, having left no explicit treatment of his primary art, should have been taken as providing the basis for the traditional suspicion of metaphor. That alleged basis is his discussion of the ‘old quarrel between philosophy and poetry’ (Republic, X, 607b).” (Johnson 4)

²¹ “The quarrel between philosophy and poetry is in the first instance political or moral. Stated in terms less exaggerated than those of the Republic, the quarrel amounts to this: poetry encourages desire, and hence the will. It encourages production for the sake of satisfying the desires, or in other words defines completeness as satisfaction. Philosophy, on the other hand, advocates the restriction of the desires or the transformation of desire in accord with the definition of completeness as wisdom. Philosophy has the advantage over poetry of being able to explain what it understands by wisdom. But poetry has the advantage over philosophy in that part of wisdom, and indeed, the regulative part, is poetic.” (Rosen 13)

²² “Remembrance will trace more openly an exceeding of philosophy that philosophy itself already broached in its beginning: the return to the beginning, the move back from philosophy to the ἀρχή that precedes it and first makes it possible, the regression across the limit of philosophy to the ἀρχή from which it would first be delimited. Remembrance cannot but unfold as archaic thinking; and in archaic thinking remembrance will always already have commenced.” (Sallis, *Double Truth* 192)

²³ “Early on, metaphor flourished in myth and poetry. It was natural for the pre-Socratic philosophers to feel at home with the mythic modes of their predecessors and to utilize figurative language to express their insights. Indeed, their philosophic fragments constitute one vast network of interrelated metaphors – and to make sense of their thought is, above all, to unpack these metaphors.” (Johnson 4)

²⁴ “In the regress to the clearing there sounds the echo not only of philosophy but also of another, an older voice. It is, says Heidegger, one ‘which still today, although unheard, speaks in the sciences into which philosophy dissolves’ (SD 74), a voice which thus echoes in philosophy and in the nonphilosophy in which philosophy is completed and dissolved. The voice is still responsive to something heard, something to which it responds. The voice is that which speaks in Parmenides’ poem; what is heard and then said is the following: ‘It is necessary that you shall learn all things / as well the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth / as the opinions of mortals in which there is no true belief’. Thus, was the clearing, even if unthought by philosophy, named in the beginning of philosophy, named ἀλήθεια, named in response to the words of the goddess, who is none other than ἀλήθεια itself (CF. GA 54: 6-7).” (Sallis, *Echoes* 36).

²⁵ “In essential history the beginning comes last. Naturally, to a way of thinking acquainted only with the form of calculation, the proposition ‘The beginning is the last’ is nonsense. To be sure, at first, at the outset, the beginning appears veiled in a peculiar way. Whence stems the remarkable fact that the beginning is easily taken for the imperfect, the unfinished, the rough. It is also called the ‘primitive’.” (Heidegger, *Parmenides* 1-2).

²⁶ “Aletheia understood as opening, says Heidegger, was mentioned at the beginning of philosophy by Parmenides. Subsequent thinkers, he claims, spoke about that which appears in the opening, but not the opening itself. Plato is

of truth has arrived at the goddess's gate: "The steeds that carry me took me as far as my heart could desire, when once they had brought me and set me on the renowned way of the goddess, who leads the man who knows through every town. On that way was I conveyed; for on it did the wise steeds convey me, drawing my chariot, and maidens led the way"; standing before the unknown in reverence – "There are the gates of the ways of Night and Day, fitted above with a lintel and below with a threshold of stone" – he soon realizes the power of speech-act: "Here did the maidens entreat with gentle words and cunningly persuade to unfasten without demur the bolted bar from the gates. Then, when the doors were thrown back, they disclosed a wide opening" (Heidegger, *Parmenides* 342). If a rhetoric of persuasion has the power to unbolt the gates, the goddess's rhetoric of presence guarantees the validity of the hermeneutic situation: "And the goddess greeted me kindly, and took my right hand in hers, and spake to me these words: 'Welcome, o youth, that comest to my abode on the car that bears thee, tended by immortal charioteers. ... Meet it is that thou shouldst learn all things, as well the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth, as the opinions of mortals in which is no true belief at all'" (Heidegger, *Parmenides* 342). Getting to the still centre of truth's beautifully shaped circularity predicates the fusion of the hermeneutic and ontological circles.

What is even more fascinating, though, is the address of the goddess-truth who, employing the cognitive aspect of rhetoric rather than its suasive one, unreservedly associates the way of persuasion with that of truth: "Come now, and I will tell thee – and do thou hearken and carry my word away – the only ways of enquiry that can be thought of" are as follows: "the one way, that it *is* and cannot not-be, is the path of Persuasion, for it attends upon Truth; the other, that it *is-not* and needs must not-be, that I tell thee is a path altogether unthinkable" (Heidegger, *Parmenides* 344). The poetic-philosophical voice of Parmenides names both "truth" and "method" as ways that give unprecedented value to the "circuit" linguistic play of – and around – being. As to the self-subversive character of language, the conflict in rhetoric which, according to de Man, precludes our aesthetic appreciation of art as the harmonious interpenetration of elements, we can only turn to Parmenides' near contemporary, the philosopher Heraclitus who informs us that, "The counter-thrust brings together, and from tones at variance comes perfect attunement, and all things come to pass through conflict" (lxxv).

We should not forget that the primal hermeneutic scene in modern times coincides with the rise of Romanticism, when Schleiermacher exposed the gendered structure of understanding. It is not surprising, therefore, that the ethical desires of Schleiermacher's theory of understanding are perpetuated today in writings on hermeneutics through metaphors of affectiveness and mutuality. The trope of the feminine, however, has vanished into the suppressed Romantic past of contemporary hermeneutic theory. The metaphors used by Romantic theorists of interpretation to describe the ethical tenor of understanding – friendship, conversation, religious community, intuitive or divinatory insight – are associated by them with woman. In its most reductive form the antidote to nihilism seems to be femininity. However, hermeneutic philosophy has repressed the fact that it once almost knew this about itself; it has repressed the link between figurations of the feminine and the desire for an ethical community. So, ironically, twentieth-century hermeneutics is a discourse grounded in the desire for an ethics of the feminine arising from a masculine Romanticism. The key metaphor of the language of hermeneutics, the circle that describes the reader's mental spiral between anticipated and proven coherence, referred initially, and perhaps most powerfully, to social experience: the idealized condition of a group created by intimate self-revelation and the reciprocal activity of understanding, often shared even by humans and divinities. Such as was Sappho's gymnasium, for instance: "there, Cypris, take... and pour gracefully into golden cups nectar that is mingled with our festivities" (2/57). A collective intersubjectivity – religious, aesthetic or ethical – seems to ground Sappho's poetic imagination.²⁷

said to have known that without light there is no appearance, but failed to mention the traversable opening which light needs. Perhaps Plato knew more than he was willing to communicate explicitly." (Wolz 300 301)

²⁷ "The fullest instance of free, reciprocal self-fulfilment is traditionally known as love; and there are many individuals who, as far as the personal life goes, have no doubt that this way of life represents the highest human value. It is just that they do not see the need, method or possibility of extending this value to a whole form of social life. Radical politics addresses the question of what this love would mean at the level of a whole society Modern ethical thought has wreaked untold damage in its false assumption that love is first of all a personal affair

Sappho expected her pupils, because they had known an aesthetic sublimation with her, to pursue the bright and the fine things in life, for her ultimate lesson was that true beauty inhabits any natural or social form. This is why the ancients compared her to Plato's Diotima, Socrates' instructor of the ascent to the beautiful. In the Greek culture, which is focused on aesthetics, beauty is the central topic of both Sapphic poetry and Platonic philosophy. Sappho's sense of beauty is apparently physical and concrete; Plato's meta-physical and abstract. Yet both ancient instructors exhibit a similar life model, based on a shared quest after beauty and truth through erotic attention and devoted engagement to ethical values: "for he that is beautiful is beautiful as far as appearances go, while he that is good will consequently also be beautiful" (Sappho 50).

Celebrating a presence and union at the origin, Sappho's language names plenitude, desire and fulfilment, in a marital jouissance which is a "hymen" free from its Derridean ambiguity: "Happy bridegroom, your marriage has been fulfilled as you prayed, you have the girl for whom you prayed" (112). If rhetoric describes how discourses are constructed to achieve certain effects, Sappho's rhetoric of *eros* proves a strategy that creates stories. Maximus of Tyre (*Orationes*) testifies: "Socrates calls Love a sophist, Sappho 'tale-weaver'" (188). Her joyous play of, and with, figure²⁸ carries exactly the linguistic grace that can connect the rhetorical and the aesthetic. The Scholiast on Hesiod's *Works and Days* affirms: "Sappho says Peitho, 'Persuasion', was the daughter of Aphrodite" (200). Sappho's rhetoric of persuasion, far from naming finitude, void or absence, gives her a filial privilege of direct access to the goddess of beauty: "Golden-crowned Aphrodite, if only I could obtain this lot" (33).

Sappho's only complete poem, in a fragmented and "disfigured" canon, is her "Ode to Aphrodite" where the rhetorization of aesthetics shows desire and reality to be tautological. "Ornate-throned immortal Aphrodite, wile-weaving daughter of Zeus, I entreat you: do not overpower my heart, mistress, with ache and anguish, but come here." Sappho introduces a rhetorical suspension which gives her language an incredible and unquestionable illocutionary force. Her rhetoric opens a province of performances, a figurative space for the art of persuasion to operate its most dazzling effects: the reverse seduction imposed by the female poet-lover on a seductive divinity. Sappho continues: "if ever in the past you heard my voice from afar and acquiesced and came, leaving your father's golden house." The reflexive operation of rhetorical figures in Sappho's hermeneutics of the goddess's intentions establishes a trope of intuition and mutuality, a mode of yearning that does not end up into the void but establishes communion and community. Memory and desire are totally attuned when longing does not arise from a sense of loss but from recollected plenitude. Projective energy and receptive intuition complement each other in a most rigorous dialogic situation: "and you, blessed one, with a smile on your immortal face asked what was the matter with me this time and why I was calling this time and what in my maddened heart I most wished to happen to myself." Aphrodite's response completes the hermeneutic circle introducing a divine rhetoric of persuasion fully integrated within the human mode: "'Whom am I to persuade this time to lead you back to her love? Who wrongs you, Sappho?'" The feminine conversation between a poetess and a goddess, informal, casual, friendly, is the expression, and the experience, of grace as it appears in this life. Sappho's interpretation of Aphrodite's mind ultimately reverses the rhetoric of divination, giving her suppliant voice an authoritative power: "Come to me now again and deliver me from oppressive anxieties; fulfil all that my heart longs for, and you yourself be my fellow-fighter" (1).

The endogamy of consciousness performed here, a kind of holy marriage, resonates aesthetic affirmation which establishes an ethical sanctuary where community is taken up into the circling mind that insists on totality. The unity of knowledge and power under the auspices of *eros* is a form of radical politics addressing the question of what this love and language would mean at the level of a group, and perhaps of a whole society. Sappho's directive to the members of her "*thiasos*" exemplifies a form of poetical wisdom pointing towards a personal and communal ethics: what it means to live well, to attain

rather than a political one. It has failed to take Aristotle's point that ethics is a branch of politics, of the question of what it is to live well, to attain happiness and serenity, at the level of a whole society." (Eagleton 413)

²⁸ "The tradition of rhetoric confirms that hint beyond any specific theory concerning the semantic status of metaphor. The very expression 'figure of speech' implies that in metaphor, as in the other tropes or turns, discourse assumes the nature of a body by displaying forms and traits which usually characterize the human face, man's 'figure'; it is as though the tropes gave to discourse a quasi-bodily externalization. By providing a kind of figurability to the message, the tropes make discourse appear." (Ricoeur 229)

happiness and fulfilment— where rhetoric and aesthetic, with an extralinguistic origin and end, reaching as far or as near as the divine, turn into praxis: “For it is not right that there should be lamentation in the house of those who serve the Muses. That would not be fitting for us” (Sappho 150).

So, returning from this backward hermeneutic tour across some of the master narratives of our culture telling the story of beauty and truth, to our modernity,²⁹ to de Man’s work (and world) “instinct with sadness,” we are bound to carry the “*aporia*” (Socratic wonder or de Manian conviction) about the “real” nature of rhetoric (the aesthetic of language) – as a way “towards” or “away from” truth. Such an acknowledgment is surely difficult and aporetic, but it keeps the question of the aesthetic still alive in our political agenda.

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²⁹ “Modernity defines itself by rejecting Greece: its freedom is conditioned by affirming what it rejects. At the same time, this rejection refuses to raise the possibility that Greece too sought the free use of its own before it too fell victim to a history that sought to ensure its future by denying the individuality of its freedom.” (Ferris xviii)