

Chapter 1 The Sea, the Land, the Collectivity, the Individual

Our language can be seen as an ancient city:
a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new
houses, and of houses with additions from various periods;
and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs
with straight regular streets and uniform houses.

L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, aph. 19.

1. Introduction

“Humans live their lives and build their institutions on dry land. Nevertheless, they seek to grasp the movement of their existence above all through a metaphoric of the perilous sea voyage” (Blumenberg 1997, 7). Blumenberg’s quotation acknowledges that the drive to build – figuratively and literally – bridges, to travel the sea (and, in most recent times, the air) has been a recurrent motif in people’s history, as though human life harbors a supplement of sense that cannot be thoroughly expendable on the terrestrial part of our planet. In this chapter, I will trace the prehistory of literary themes of sea and land in Classical authors such as Hesiod, Alcaeus, Lucretius, Horace, and John the Evangelist, to name a few; in providing a political frame to their works (or showing the lack thereof), I will emphasize the symbolic relevance that such themes have taken on for both the individual and the collectivity. The last section of the chapter will lay out the theoretical movement that I have been implementing throughout.

W.H. Auden once stated that “Revolutionary changes in sensibility or styles are rare,” and he mentioned three of them: the appearance on the literary stage of *amor* in the twelfth century, the disappearance, later on, of the allegory “as a common literary genre,” and “the complex of attitudes and style” (called Romanticism) that emerged in eighteenth century (15). He then went on to write *The Enchafèd Flood* as “an attempt to understand the nature of Romanticism through an examination of its treatment of a single theme, the sea” (15). In this book, Auden seems to take for granted the presence of the sea among literary objects, and he is hardly to be reprimanded for this stance: since the dawn of Western literary writing, the sea has been an omnipresent theme, difficult to overlook. Auden himself provides us with many quotations about the sea from ancient literary works, such as the Old Testament, the Greek myths, Latin poetry, and medieval and modern writings up to the Romantic period. In this dissertation, I will try to delve into a dimension of the theme of the sea more overlooked than noticed by existing scholarship, namely its juxtaposition to the land. The sea is often labeled as highly metaphorical and symbolic, as if this attribution discharges the one who labels it as such from the task to elaborate the metaphorization and its implications for the human beings. By contrast, I believe it is worth noting which literary frames, both implicit and explicit, the sea has been part of thus far, what symbolic game has been played, which concatenations have been formed. In *The Corrupting Sea*, Horden and Purcell write: “In the ancient geographical tradition, the sea shapes the land, not the other way about” (11). What I am engaged in here

is exactly one of the ways in which the sea has shaped the land, namely the political.

Auden writes:

The second verse of the first chapter of the Book of Genesis runs as follows: 'And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.' [...] And on the third [day] He gathered the waters under the heaven 'unto one place, and let the dry land appear; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas.' [...] The sea or the great waters, that is, are the symbol for the primordial undifferentiated flux, the substance which became created nature only by having form imposed upon or wedded to it. The sea, in fact, is the state of barbaric vagueness and disorder out of which civilization has emerged and into which, unless saved by the effort of gods and men, it is always liable to relapse (18-19).

The representation of the sea as a chaotic environment *out of which civilization has emerged* performs to my purpose the service to introduce, if implicitly, the conflicting binary sea/land with which I will deal throughout my dissertation. Moreover, again in an implicit way, it locks this spatial binary to an enlarged, political destiny of *civilized* humankind whose fate may yet be subject to fall, indeed *relapse* into the amorphous watery element.¹ However, as Auden relates to sea and land as all-encompassing spheres basically *passive* during the possible rise and fall of mankind, he fails to point out the *peculiar* role that individuals and collectivity as political agents play during that process. Hence, although highly fascinating, Auden's symbolic interpretation of the relationships between sea and land (and, later in the same work, of ship, city, and mankind), bears witness – inevitably – to the fact that he was mostly interested in focusing on aesthetic concerns, and, therefore, he refrained from further deepening his truly remarkable “political” observations; for this reason they remained suggestive but undeveloped. My goal is, by contrast, to engage with aesthetic readings like Auden's, and to use them in order to flesh out their political meaning.

Even if one agrees with Auden's characterizations of the sea (the space of “barbaric vagueness and disorder”) and land (the civilized venue “always liable to relapse” into the fluid chaos) as metaphors of primordial and unstable human environments, the need to penetrate deeper into their obviously complex interplay persists. Part of our founding literary tradition, the twinned theme of land-and-sea has a weighty presence in ancient works; however, as Fredric Jameson maintains,

These matters [which are part of the *mystery* of our cultural past] can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic a form, they are seen as sharing a

¹ It is almost impossible to read Auden's work without thinking to the opposite movement as well: namely, the *sinking* into the sea of the civilization that once dwelled on the island of Atlantis, in those days when “the Atlantic was navigable,” a tale that Plato tells in his dialogues *Timaeus*, and *Critias*.

single fundamental theme [...]; only if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot (1981, 19-20).

The story of the passage from the vagueness of the sea to the dangerousness of the land, and its possible return, appears to be among the most important threads of the “single vast unfinished plot” concerning the humanity, both as collective and as individual subject. In the next sections I will first outline the contrast and interaction between the elusive entities of sea and land, and the relevance they have in ancient literary works. Second, I will explore the relationships between the individual and the collectivity that are established with that interaction. With politics as the larger frame, my goal is to unearth the symbolic relevance of sea and land as literary devices and structures and show their interconnection.

2. Sea Versus Land?

In a work that is among the most ancient in Western culture, the Greek poet Hesiod instructs his indolent, devious, and unwise brother Perses about life and other concerns, trying to reform his conduct (the outcome remains unknown). It is better known that because of its didactic and moral content, the *Érga kai Hêmérai* (*Works and Days*) gives the reader many insights into an array of topics that range from marriage to agriculture, from entrepreneurship to religion. Spiritual and economic aspects of daily life are equally present in the work. Thus, one can put forward the hypothesis that Hesiod laid out, in a literary and succinct way, the structure of the social, cultural and economic system in which he was living and writing.² The *Works and Days* tells many tales previously unknown and which will acquire lasting notoriety: “in Hesiod’s work we find the first occurrences of stories such as that of Prometheus the fire bringer, Pandora (whose box was really a jar), and the wars of the gods and titans, stories echoed in other mythologies” (Hesiod 2005, 4). Hesiod explains how hardship afflicts those who do not follow the cosmic harmony when they undertake an enterprise, and that justice rules over human labor. Ethics and virtue, then, not ambition, must lead human steps: “Neither disasters nor famine befall men just in their dealings,” (228). Although those mythical tales significantly nourished the ensuing literary culture, I am more interested in Hesiod’s description of daily life, in his more colorful pessimism than in his poetic notes. The Greek author first introduces his general theory about cosmos, human labor, and justice, almost as a pretext to point out the mistakes his brother Perses has made and still makes. The latter has in fact squandered his part of heritage, and has now filed a complaint (and, apparently, bribed the judges) in order to have more. Hesiod’s outburst of resentful wrath directed towards Perses confers on his poem an “inescapable and hardly culpable air of improvisation” (14); and yet, precisely its indignant and contemptuous language of improvisation

² A “Hesiod question” as well as a “Homer question” exists, due to lack of accurate biographical information. M. Marsilio claims: “we cannot know precisely which (or if any) details in the poet’s biography are authentic, nor can we be certain that a man named Hesiod existed. The “Hesiod” of *Theogony* and *Works and Days* may be a historical individual, a poetic persona, or a mixture of both. [However] our ability to recover the virtues and truths of *Theogony* and *Works and Days* is not affected by the mystery of “Hesiod”” (Xiii). Regardless of the uncertainty, the scholarship tends to agree that Hesiod the character (multiple or single that may be) does provide us with useful and realistic information about his life and times.

ushers in the poet's mythical view of the cosmos. Hesiod deems that good and evil dwells equally on land and sea, unlike his nearly coeval fellow citizen Alcaeus (presumably 620-570 BC), whose poetic spirit detects and thus depicts instead a sharp disparity between them (as we will see later in this same section). Not only does Hesiod believe in the right measure as the principle that governs sea and land; not only is he scolding Perses's stupidity; he is also painting a cosmic picture, as Stephanie Nelson maintains:

Hesiod is not teaching us how to farm. He is teaching us what the cycle of the year, with its balance of summer and winter, of good and evil, of profit and risk, of anxiety and relaxation, implies about the will of Zeus. [...] His intention was [...] to show us how the order of Zeus permeates nature and includes ourselves. (57-8)

However, this far-reaching endeavor does not come at small price: the natural order Zeus implements and dictates requires self-effacement and devotion, and the combination of both counters human eagerness to master one's own fate. In Hesiod's cosmic year and time, *hybris* is nowhere to be found, precisely because firstly, Zeus rules; secondly, the world is well, and, lastly, the *principium individuationis* (that will eventually lead to the end of Greek Tragedy, according to Friedrich Nietzsche), has yet to emerge. This *status quo* will not last for long, however. As Massimo Cacciari writes,

'Sano' era lo 'stato' in cui vivevano gli uomini quando il mondo era retto dal Dio [...] Nel tempo in cui Dio siede al timone, tempo di un' *arché* felice [...], non vi è posto né per il *pólemos* né per la *stásis*, per *nessun* tipo di guerra [...]. Eirene domina perfetta. Ma non vi è polis! (Cacciari 1994, 31-2).

This convincing statement delineates the clear-cut difference between the world of Hesiod and that of Alcaeus – and, accordingly, their poetic legacies, which may be seen as the opposite faces of the same token. It is in the representation of the sea that we see this difference. For Hesiod, the seasonally dangerous sea symbolizes the decaying process that seemingly is looming on the horizon yonder, while he takes pleasure in the healthy cosmic world of divine measure and order; whereas for Alcaeus, who constantly toils in the perilously insecure human settlement and is relentlessly at strife with his fellow citizens, this conflicting feature is projected onto *the sea*. Therefore, it is not surprising that the two poets find inspiration from different aesthetic and political motifs, and, in turn, inspire different sort of poetry in the followers. While Alcaeus draws motivation from war poetry (Homer) and will appeal to writers entangled in Imperial nets (of the sort of Horace and Virgil, for example); Hesiod seems to inspire godly authors, such as St. John the Apostle, whose *Book of Revelation* displays some conceptual affinity with his Greek predecessor. If the cosmology that Hesiod portrays is “city-less,” to rephrase Cacciari, and the order is instilled from above and independently of human action, as Nelson points out, then the convergence between the Holy Scriptures and the *Theogony* appears quite natural. In both Hesiod and St. John the Apostle it is clear that the fate of the whole (land and sea,

people) will determine the fate of the part (singularity), and that the latter has no bearing on the outcome, especially if it fails to harmonize its acts with the natural, divine constellation (possibly, Perses's case). The symmetry inherent in the "mischievous sea and land" described by Hesiod seems to find its correspondence in the *Book of Revelation*, where St. John states:

And the angel that I saw standing upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his right hand to heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created the heaven and the things that are therein, and the earth and the things that are therein, and the sea and the things that are therein, that there shall be delay no longer (10:5-10:6).

Therefore, God will strike them *both* soon. A few lines later, he confirms that divine punishment is forthcoming: "Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe for the earth and for the sea: because the devil is gone down unto you, having great wrath, knowing that he hath but a short time" (12:12). Only towards the end of his work does the Apostle separate the fate of the watery and the earthly elements: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth are passed away; and the sea is no more" (21:1). Yet, in spite of the opinion concerning the sea as shameful cradle of evil, which Auden smoothly rephrased as vague and barbaric, one should consider the messianic significance that St. John's vision has reached by the end of his work (from which this last quotation is taken). Rather than sanction the wickedness of the sea, in fact, the Apostle illustrates the vision of the *new* world, the one *the Just* will dwell in when their circular time, as humans know it before Jesus's second arrive on earth, will expire. In sum, as in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, this text concerns and displays a pre-political – better still, an a-political – space within which land and sea are ordered according to a homogeneous rule, and hence the humankind it portrays falls under a more or less communal fate, regardless of the political system and the *poleis* in which it is living.

The divinely planned "order of things" holds true in Homer's *works* as well; however, one cannot say the same regarding the poet's own *time*.³ As John Alvis writes, "Nothing is so certain in the Homeric poems as the sense that the age of heroes has passed."⁴ [...] He [Homer] *implies* that the gods have ceased to

³ My consideration originates from the opinion that "progress" is a modern, inadequate, and also deceitful way of interpreting history, as Leopardi would say. Vegetti pointed out that "Non è possibile pensare che nel mondo antico cultura, scienze, filosofia si sviluppino in una temporalità omogenea tale che si possa parlare di «fasi», di «tappe» o di svolte valide per tutte le loro forme;" (1983, 17). The *homogeneous temporality* (that is, the linear, progressive unfolding of time) in which ideas related to each other, belonging to one or more disciplines, circulate so that a specifically historical culture flourishes, takes place alongside *traditional knowledge*, by definition a system of thoughts tightly attached to a specific cultural past and less inclined to adapt and transform. Hence, the dramatic change I am going to describe soon did *not* occur in *this* temporality (*synchronic time*), but in conceptuality (*diachronic time*). Later on, I will further linger on this idea.

⁴ "The age of heroes" is the second age of humankind, according to Giambattista Vico, the first being "the age of gods," and the third "the age of man," predictably enough. I will devote some pages to analyze the theory of the Italian philosopher at the end of this chapter.

mingle in generations with mortals. The Olympians appear to cease altogether from amorous relations with human beings” (Alvis, 3, emphasis added).⁵ Accordingly, one should assume they no longer steer the ship, as Cacciari would say, at the time in which Homer *writes* (or tells) his stories.⁶ Homer’s unspoken opinion that mortals are now discarded by the gods highlights the newly acquired human condition, marked by both existential solitude and political autonomy from the divine council. In disappearing, the gods have opened the doors to unprecedented opportunity to develop secular wisdom; henceforth, individual and collectivity have to rely upon *human*, not heavenly, knowledge. While the Greek bard is still telling stories involving mortals and immortals, he is at the same moment testifying that the time of the gods is gone, and that their leading position is now vacant: singularities or groups, the philosopher or the warriors, have the chance to elevate their social ranking, while they need to take on new roles and responsibilities, regardless of their will or intention.

3. The Position of the Individual: Hans Blumenberg Reads Lucretius

The exodus of the gods that, according to Alvis, Homer experienced, and his poetry highlighted, did not beget the uncertainty of human life (it has always been there, since Perses’s entrepreneurship and before). However, it definitely denied – once, if not forever – the customary opinion that everything happening beneath the sky had an inspiring and commanding reason above it. The metaphors of the sea turned out to be the perfect rhetorical tool to frame unpredictable human events without resorting to god’s will, so that it partly filled the void of authority. The inexplicability of some unfortunate mishaps while sailing the sea is, in fact, now no longer dictated by a change of god’s plan or by inherent unfathomableness; it does not come as a natural consequence after a foolish human’s decision to challenge the natural order through a passage over the watery element. Instead, it is the mirror image of the newly acquired human condition, in which mortals not only steer the ship, but find themselves, as a people, a community, apparently on board (we will, however, discover soon that the latter statement allows exceptions). If one accepts this premise, it becomes easier to understand what the *Book of Revelation* and the fourth Eclogue by Virgil are describing, and why: through the allegorical “drying out” of the land, they depict a condition in which humans – *all of us* – can no longer travel on the perilous sea of secular life; hence, human beings escape, by dint of divine sublimation, the

⁵ The consideration expressed by both Alvis and Cacciari seem to rely on what Heidegger thought about this very same matter. The German philosopher maintains that one of the characteristics of the Modern World is the loss of the gods: “The loss of the gods is the situation of indecision regarding God and the gods. [...] When this occurs, then the gods have fled. The resultant void is compensated for by means of historiographical and psychological investigation of myth” (1977, 117). As we will see later on, Vico’s anthropological analysis of myth appears to open up the horizon for these subsequent theories.

⁶ Hannah Arendt seems equally impressed when she points out: “It seems quite striking that the Homeric gods act only with respect to men, ruling them from afar or interfering in their affairs. Conflicts and strife between the gods also seem to arise chiefly from their part in human affairs [...]. What then appears is a story in which men and gods act together, but the scene is set by the mortals...” (23, note 1).

constraints that have been set up for them.⁷ As Blumenberg maintains, “Two prior assumptions above all determine the burden of meaning carried by the metaphors of seafaring and shipwreck: first, the sea as a naturally given boundary of the realm of human activities, and, second, its demonization as the sphere of the unreckonable and lawless” (1997, 8). And yet, there seem to be a few exceptions to this mindset that result from the general embarkation, exceptions that involve and depend on the philosophical position one assumes towards life: “Only where there can be no achievement of a goal, as in the cases of the Skeptics and Epicureans, can calm on the high seas itself stand for a vision of pure good fortune” (7). The blemished reputation of the sea “as the sphere of the unreckonable and lawless” somehow paves the way for the surfacing of a more acute philosophical attitude vis-à-vis the complex endeavor that is human life. In the godless world, or in the world where gods no longer directly intervene in human affairs, one needs to learn how to metabolize highs and lows on one’s own, how to make sense of them apart from the bigger picture, as it were, and then move on. If seafaring and shipwreck allegorize all human existence, then “Shipwreck, as seen by a survivor, is the figure of an initial philosophical experience” (12). The survivor soon-to-become philosopher whom Blumenberg has in mind possesses the heart and the soul of the Latin poet Lucretius, who wrote, in his *De Rerum Natura*:

It’s sweet, when winds blow wild on open
seas,
To watch from land your neighbor’s vast
travail,
Not that men’s miseries bring us dear
delight,
But that to see what ills we’re spared is sweet;
Sweet, too, to watch the cruel contest of war
Ranging the field when you need share no danger.
(*The Nature of Things*, II, 1-6)

Not only does Lucretius connect the experience of shipwreck and philosophy (and, subsequently, war); he also breaks open the all-inclusive world in which Hesiod (and, later on, St. John) had enclosed humankind to form a single unit, for better or for worse. Indeed, it is exactly by virtue of his philosophical detachment that Lucretius can ward off the communal fate of the human race. By means of the metaphorical shipwreck, he narrates the worldly epiphany of an ill-fated *individual* reaction in the face of a *collective* collapse. However, that story mostly concerns just *one* person, and this one, lonely human being is *not* on board, to the disappointment, perhaps, of Pascal and Blumenberg. As one scholar wrote:

⁷ Blumenberg reminds us that, according to Blaise Pascal, all of us are on the ship (Blumenberg, 19). Conversely, Giorgio Pasquali, commenting on Horace’s *Ode* 1.14, will unassumingly point out the difference between the latter and Alcaeus (who appears always to be *on* the ship doomed to shipwreck), and the similarity of the former with Lucretius (who also contemplatively sits on the shore): “Orazio guarda fermo sul lido una nave che è già in porto, o meglio presso la bocca del porto combatte con i marosi; dunque una concezione simile al lucreziano *suave mari magno*. Alceo naviga egli stesso sulla nave” (36).

The world in which Lucretius lived, the entire Mediterranean world of the First Century B.C., experienced a crisis as profound as can be imagined absent its elimination. [...] The crisis was, at least, political, military, cultural, and intellectual. [...] The world of *civitas* has been shattered by its own success, and *this shattering set its members free to act on their own versions of truth and reality, to find their own sets of values* [...]. The old structure of ideas, purposes, and values no longer offered what everyone accepted as explanation of the nature of things (Minyard, 1-2, emphasis added).

The collapse of the society in which he was living may have or may not have elicited Lucretius's disregard for public affairs and, as a reaction, sharpened his individualism. There is no doubt that his Epicureanism fostered his *individual* endurance and strength while the entire community (*civitas*) was being shaken to the core, as Minyard points out. The refusal of religion, inherent in Epicurus's philosophy, and the consequent postulate that the human factor is both the beginning and the end of the meaning (if any can be found in nature), concurred to compound Lucretius's own position toward everyday life. James H. Nichols wrote: "The Epicurean views the whole of nature as fundamentally matter in motion, moving without purpose, unformed by anything like Platonic ideas, unguided by natural ends. Within this mechanistic, unteleological universe, man is a naturally individual being" (20). Lucretius could neither intensely embrace any existing political model nor theorize new ones. Nevertheless, his poetics and philosophy helped to better define the *individual* position that will later be labeled as existential, as opposed to a *collective* stance. Similarly convinced (like his Greek post-Hesiod predecessor Epicurus) that knowledge comes from human efforts and not from a god's grace, and affected by the collapse of the Mediterranean world, Lucretius seemed to embrace the idea that "social institutions are founded on ethical delusion. They are not natural, in the sense that they do not flow from nature's demands and so are not connected to nature by knowledge. They are the product of human impositions upon nature" (Minyard, 54). The allegory of the shipwreck and the viewer, however, does not offer a strictly political viewpoint, yet it sanctions the existence of the binary opposition actor/spectator, a politically loaded relationship that has attracted significant attention from at least one twentieth century scholar.⁸ The position of the individual Lucretius in the face of the event of the downfall, the separation between a collective, historical *action* – even more relevant because of its *passive*, elusive character, so that only the most sensitive minds were aware of its oblivious wreckage – and a solitary, nearly a-temporal and unconcerned

⁸ Hannah Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* points out the importance of the viewer in describing political events: "The spectator, because he is not involved, can perceive th[e] design of providence or nature, which is hidden from the actor. So we have the spectacle and the spectator on one side, the actors and all the single events on the other. In the context of the French Revolution, it seemed to Kant that the spectator's view carried the ultimate meaning of the event, although this view yielded no maxim for acting. [...] We found that in Kant the common distinction or antagonism between theory and practice in political matters is the distinction between the spectator and the actor" (1992, 52, 65).

contemplation, perfectly portrays the chasm I am trying to shed light on. The human divide that rests upon the existential and philosophical contrast between sea and land, nevertheless, dictates the composition and the cultural characterization of the global landscape. The safe land from which the solitary Lucretius witnessed the shipwreck of the trembling ship of the *civitas* had already been in Greece's Alcaeus, and was soon destined to become in Rome's Horace, the turbulent point of departure and the coveted point of approach of the ship of State.

4. Of Ships and States: Homer, Alcaeus, Horace

Si chartae sileant quod bene feceris,
Mercedem tuleris.

[If history's pages leave you unrecorded,
Your deeds of virtue cannot be rewarded.]
Horace, 4.8

At the twilight of the era in which Hesiod's gods were steering the ship, the Greek bard Homer began telling the story of the Olympians' last interventions in human affairs. Turned backward in time, as Alvis maintains, and – supposedly – blind in space though it was, Homer's gaze did not fail to perceive that, in its final juncture, the belligerent Achaean expedition to bring back Helen had lost its character of mere vindictive reaction. Clearly, the long-lasting siege had assumed, by its tenth and final year, the fashion of an urbanized, albeit pre-political, settlement. In fact, virtually no ritual defining the daily cultural life was missing: funerals, games, sacrifices to the gods, were all part of the invader's routine. Finally, the clash between private and public that the reader witnesses at the very beginning of the book, makes its pre-political nature undoubtedly clear, as I clarify below. At the onset, *The Iliad* stages the god's wrath, and the resulting conflicts among the elite of those who have been sieging Troy for nine years. The reader learns that Apollo is making the Achaeans' life miserable because Agamemnon refuses to release Chryseis, the daughter of the Trojan soothsayer Chryses, who is priest of Apollo. When Calchas, the Greek "most distinguished diviner" (1, 69), unveils the reason for divine anger, Achilles exhorts king Agamemnon to yield: the latter, infuriated and offended, abides by the request but claims Achilles's own prey of war, Briseis, as compensation, triggering in turn the Myrmidon's rage. Infuriated, Achilles withdraws from the battlefield (1, 1-244). In the Achaean camp the situation is complex, and made even more convoluted by the lack of a recognized collective space – for example, an assembly – in which a shared set of rules is negotiated and monitored. Albeit politically colored, the assemblage in which such cases are discussed is still an imperfect body, where many participants are rulers of small provinces in their motherland, and not inclined to smoothly alienate even the slightest part of influence they claim over their own tribe. The "absent institution" generates dissent; as a result, either sheer force or the god's disguised authority often prevails over consent. Arendt comments (glossing Werner Jaeger),

The rise of the city-state meant that man received "besides his private life a sort of second life, his *bios politikos*. Now every citizen belongs to two orders of existence; and there is a sharp

distinction in his life between what is his own (*idion*) and what is communal (*koinon*).” [W. Jaeger, *Paideia* (1945), III, 111] It was not just an opinion or theory of Aristotle but a simple historical fact that the foundation of the *polis* was preceded by the destruction of all organized units resting on kinship, such as the *phratria* and the *phylē* (1958, 24).

The extent of historical accuracy of Arendt’s opinion does not undermine the literary plot by Homer. As far as the Achaean kings are concerned, the situation is complicated by the fact that what, in this specific occurrence, is *idion* (their regional army, that is) is also *koinon*, beginning with the very moment they joined the undertaking of Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus. Although apparently a federation of some sort is already in place, and many kings have therefore yielded to one ruler – Agamemnon, of course – the stage that Homer is describing is situated in-between these two moments, precisely in the gray zone existing before the perfect implementation of the city-state that follows, slowly and gradually, the existence and, perhaps, the destruction of all organized units. The Greek poet gives the reader a snapshot of the emerging need of a politically organized body while, at the same time, illustrating its absence. If the critical reader adopts the figure of the body as a metaphor to portray the political scenario at this point in *The Iliad* (as in Plato’s political theory, for instance), the resulting image would be that of a partially disconnected entity in which the organs act incongruously and disjointedly. This image would represent an initial phase of a ripening process, the completion of which would display the full bloom of the political body as an *organism*, in which all the components tend to behave (but control is never total) and to follow the leading one, the head. No character better than Achilles mirrors the advancement in this in-progress political course. The first sign of his political maturation comes when he allows Patroclus to wear his armor and join the Achaeans’ army after the withdrawal, in the hope to save his faction and the ships (whose symbolic value will soon be investigated). Moreover, while he stubbornly adheres to his *private* decision to delay the fight until full satisfaction is given, he *publicly* exhorts his warriors with perhaps his first “political” speech:

Myrmidons, remember how you boasted over the Trojans while I was angry. You so much loved to reproach me, saying: ‘Cruel son of Peleus, raised on a bitter gall, keeping your people here beside the ships! Well, we’ll take our fleet and sail for home if you stay in such a dreadful temper.’ You’d scold me just that way—and here it is: the glorious work of war you so adored! So if you have some valor, show it now! (*The Iliad*, 16, 200-209).

The growth process continues, and arrives at full wisdom when, after Patroclus’s death, Achilles decides to resume war against the Trojans and their leader Hector – who murdered his friend – though the Myrmidon knows in advance that his return to the fight will bring him the same reward his beloved Patroclus gained, so that he will never see his home again. While mourning for Patroclus’s demise,

Achilles glumly and desolately whispers: “oh, if gods and men could only end their strife and anger, which maddens even the wise and, so much sweeter than the trickling honey, grows in the chest of a warrior like smoke, as Agamemnon made me angry now. Very well, we’ll let bygones be bygones, and control our temper because we must.” (18, 107-111) It is exactly at this point that the warrior shows he has learned the lesson that Phoenix has taught him since childhood, and which was summarized by the old mentor in book 9: “Aged Peleus sent me along that day you went to join Agamemnon, only a boy, knowing nothing of war or assemblies where men show eloquence. He made me the one who taught you to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds” (9, 18, 438-443). According to Arendt, the final formula (“to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds”) marks human beings as belonging to “the political” as opposed to those who dwell in the “a-“ or “pre-political” settlement. She explains that “Of all activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the *bios politikos*, namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*), out of which rises the realm of human affairs (*ta tōn anthrōpōn pragmata*, as Plato used to call it) from which everything merely necessary or useful is strictly excluded” (1958, 24-5). When Achilles rises to the challenge that eventually will cost him his life, he is also, at the same time, acknowledging that the separation between the battlefield and the assembly is no longer a conceptual one, but merely spatial; therefore, the council that takes place where the Achaeans’ ships are anchored, the very same venue where “great words” have to be – and definitely *are*, in *The Iliad* – spoken, stands for the Aristocratic council (the assembly that will become the *Boulé* in Solon’s legislation, a few centuries later) that the warriors left on Greek soil to avenge one of theirs and to set Troy on fire.

Homer seems to pave the way for such an equivalence between ships and *polis* all along. From the very first canto, the ships serve as the essential household of the Greeks, and the opposition between the city of Troy and the ships of the Achaeans is constantly evoked by both Trojans and Greeks, as well as by the voice of the narrator himself. Encouraging Calchas to disclose the reason of Apollo’s rage, Achilles says: “Courage dear fellow—tell us what you know. I swear by Apollo, whom you invoke when you declare your oracles to us, no one, while I live and see on this earth, will lay hands on you by our ships” (1, 85-89). In another moment, the reader seems urged to understand that the fall of the city will mean the victory of the ships: when Odysseus screams “stay here, my people, stay right here till we plunder their city, as Zeus has planned!” Homer glosses: “And the Danaans bellowed hurrah—those ships echoed horribly with roars of warriors applauding ingenious Odysseus’ words.” (2, 331-335). These and many similar instances infuse in the reader the firm idea that the ships have been thoroughly, if not at every occurrence, metaphorized, and that they are meant to convey the conviction that their protection equals the safeness and soundness of the *polis* while its soldiers are engaged in a battle outside its perimeter.⁹ Perhaps

⁹ *The Iliad* XII-XVI basically concerns the battle that is taking place right outside and on the border of Achaean’s camp, where Hector and his Trojans are confining the Greeks. In this lengthy occurrence, the ships are constantly referred to, as obviously are *de facto*, as the dwelling of the

the most convincing evidence of the political status of the ships is once again to be found in the words uttered by Achilles in reply to the ambassadors sent by Agamemnon with the task of convincing him to resume the battle: after listening to the eloquent speech of Odysseus, the passionate peroration of Phoenix, and finally the appeal of Telamonian Aias,

Peleus' son Achilles answered him: "Magnificent Telamonian Aias, I can only agree with what you say—but I tell you it infuriates me to be humiliated before our people by Agamemnon, treated like a tramp. So you two go [he asked his old mentor Phoenix to rest in his camp that night, MV] and report my message: I won't even consider bloody war till that dangerous Hector, Priam's son, forces his way to our Myrmidon camp amid much slaughter, sets the fleet aflame. But when he comes near my own high-beaked ship I think his wildness will be tamed a bit!" (9, 643-655).

The importance of protecting the ships is doubtless apparent both realistically and allegorically. Had the fleet been set on fire, the Achaeans would lose any hope of returning to their primary dwellings (the ships secondary being because real but also metaphorical, surrogate and temporary) even if they had survived the Trojans' blows. This is tantamount to saying that there is no difference between the fortification to protect the ships on the Anatolian shore and the walls around any single Greek *poleis* whose army is now at war against Hector's people. Once the enemy has entered the gates and set the city *or* the ships on fire, the fate of that place is sealed, whereas its dwellers might flee on the ground and escape death. Here, the metaphorical function seems to reach its apex, and the substitutability between the two *political objects* is so deeply understood and widely accepted that it goes virtually without saying: the *Poem*, that is, does not need to take heed to emphasize it. However, what the *Reader*, ancient or modern may be, understands through Homer's lines, owes its meaningfulness (or its ambivalence) to the semiotic combination that generates when and where the poem encounters the reader's encyclopedia, as Umberto Eco calls it. The mutual influence exerted by these "semiotic actors" (namely, text and reader) creates a very specific set of circumstances wherein the reader *becomes* the interpreter. Eco maintains that:

The success of a metaphor is a function of the sociocultural format of the interpreting subjects' encyclopedia. In this perspective, metaphors are produced solely on the basis of a rich cultural framework, on the basis, that is, of a universe of content that is already organized into networks of interpretants, which decide (semiotically) upon the identities and differences of properties (1983, 254-255).

Greek warriors. To bestow upon the long chain of ships a more *polis*-like look, the Greeks have built a wall around them. Yet, it seems to me that the situation all but reinforces the metaphorical meaning highlighted thus far.

Hence, according to the Italian semiotician, metaphor is a secondary product that comes to light and performs effectively only when a number of elements has been arranged to form a web of information at the disposal of both the author (who uses them to produce the text) and, subsequently, the interpreter (who *re-inscribes* them in a larger semiotic context).¹⁰ The metaphor, like a previously unknown *island*, displays its semiotic richness only when it is discovered by its “networks of interpretants,” which appropriately chart it on the map of knowledge that is continually drawn and modified in the wake of the latest sightings. Therefore, the attribution of symbolic meaning to the content that follows the *poiesis* (the technical *and* poetic creative process) may not be immediate: until an adequately skilled interpreter attends the textual performance, a delay is imposed. Homer, the well aware but not yet the thoroughly omniscient spectator, as Kant and Arendt would define it, provides the components that, afterward, rhetoric, by means of metaphor, will coalesce and re-define. In the Greece of the eighth century BCE, where humankind is taking possession of the world left unruly by the “withdrawing gods,” Homer’s poetry is minting a remarkable part of what Eco labeled “the interpreting subjects’ encyclopedia,” making it an ensemble of meaningful features that identify humans anthropologically, as he who belongs to a class whose artifacts and offspring bear his stamp. The proximity between *ship* and *city* is signified by the connections they both reveal vis-à-vis *humankind*, in a sort of syllogism where the medium term is humankind.¹¹ As a result, the mortal author is mirrored in his works (namely, both ship and city) in so far as his language *tells* them. Vegetti says:

Per Omero, l’uomo è prima di tutto un essere mortale mangiatore di pane (*Od.* IX 191); [...] Nel contrapporre il suo mangiatore di pane ai selvaggi Ciclopi, Omero gli attribuisce però un altro carattere, destinato a conoscere uno straordinario sviluppo: egli è un «costruttore di navi» (*Od.* IX 125) (1987, 95-6).

¹⁰ As always, an alternative *interpretation* is also possible. Jorge Luis Borges maintains in his *Historia de la Eternidad* that “Una de las más frías aberraciones que las historias literarias registran, son las menciones enigmáticas o *kennningar* de la poesía de Islandia. [...] [F]ueron el primer deliberado goce verbal de una literatura instintiva.” He then goes on saying that in the line *Hubo tempestad de espadas y alimento de cuervos* [*There were swords storm and crow food*, my translation, MV] “la buena contraposición de las dos metáforas [...] engaña ventajosamente al lector, permitiéndole suponer que se trata de una sola fuerte intuición de un combate y su resto. Otra es la desairada verdad. *Alimento de cuervos* —confesémoslo de una vez— es uno de los prefijados sinónimos de *cadaver*, así como *tempestad de espadas* lo es de *batalla*. Esas equivalencias eran precisamente las *kennningar*. Retenerlas y aplicarles sin repetirse, era el ansioso ideal de esos primitivos hombres de letras. En buena cantidad, permitían salvar las dificultades de una métrica rigurosa, muy exigente de aliteración y rima interior” (1953, 43-44). It is, in my view, possible to apply these same observations to Homer’s oral poetry, though it is hard to determine how concerned about metrics the Greek bard was; on the other hand, the need to create devices to recall and orally repeat long part of the poem was doubtless paramount.

¹¹ Roughly said, the canonical explanation would have it that one metaphor is such only if it shares a common *value* with the object metaphorized (I will devote the final section of this chapter to this triangulation). Here, I prefer the strict philosophical example over the rhetorical (or, differently said, metaphysical) one.

The examples I highlighted from *The Iliad* and the one that I just quoted from *The Odyssey* befit the same entry of the mentioned above encyclopedia, the “politics-in-the-making,” as it were: the linguistic frame in which they were collected and narrated has imposed its mark on them unmistakably, a mark that semiotics converted in currency accepted and exchanged within its specific market place.

Semiotics and symbolic analysis help to connect elements and allegorize them because they partake of the same broad – and, at times, perhaps dim – system of references, sometimes in spite of the author’s awareness as Homer’s example proved. As I showed, in fact, in *The Iliad* the ships stand for the *polis* because Homer’s *poetry*, not his will, suggests so. As a result, the poet’s voice channels a higher and unchecked meaning much the same way the *Ion* by Plato the voice of the god.¹²

This is not the case with the Greek poet Alcaeus, whose poetic and political purposes appear thoroughly deliberate.¹³ Although he wrote his poetry after Homer (there can be only speculations about his life period, but circa 630-580 BCE), as a scholar states, “Time has dealt harshly with Alcaeus’s compositions, for not a single complete poem has survived to the present” (Martin, 15). Nevertheless, according to past and present scholars, political concerns are deeply embedded in his writings that survived. Born in the city-state of Mytilene, on the island of Lesbos, during a period of political unrest that shook all of Greece, Alcaeus was an active member of an aristocratic party that faced both success and failure: it appears that he and his faction were exiled more than once. Therefore, it is not surprising that his party’s struggle with the rulers of Mytilene of old (Myrsilus and Pittacus) played a major role in his political poems. Among the latter, I am interested in those where nautical descriptions are found. As Martin claims,

One of Alcaeus’s favorite images is the storm-racked ship. There is [...] substantial evidence that Alcaeus’s ship images, or at least some of them, are more than simple images, that they have an allegorical function and are to be related to Alcaeus’s partisan involvement in the political turmoil of his city-state Mytilene. [...] Nautical imagery was well established in [...] earlier poetry. [...] There is not, however, in this prior literature an instance of an image in which a ship symbolizes the state or a political coterie within the state (53-54).

The scholar is pointing out what seems to be widely accepted nowadays. By many accounts, the first occurrence in nautical imagery of the metaphor of the “ship of State” is Alcaeus’s original invention. The truthfulness of the interpretation of the would-be metaphor (i.e., if “the ship” truly stands for “the State”) has been

¹² Briefly said, in this Platonic work Socrates maintains that when the bard sings his poetry, he is inspired by the god. In other words, he does not *have* an art, he does not act artistically; conversely, he is acted upon.

¹³ Recent scholarship on Alcaeus’ work is far from abundant. Among them, I consulted Page (1959), Martin (1972), and Hutchinson (2001) to build my argument and to better define the historical context in which the Lesbian poet lived. It goes without saying that, given the scanty record left, no certainty is to be found concerning Alcaeus’ time and works.

troubling scholars at least since the first century AD. During that period of time, the otherwise obscure Heraclitus (not to be confused with “Heraclitus, the Obscure” – Ὁ Σκοτεινός – the Greek philosopher, who lived a few centuries earlier) composed his *Allegoriae Homericae*, in which he claimed

[...] we shall find the lyric poet of Mytilene [Alcaeus] often enough using allegory. He likewise compares the disturbances of a tyranny to a stormy sea:

How the winds set, I cannot tell:
Waves roll from this side
And from that, and in between
In our black ship we drift,

And labor in the monstrous storm:
The bilge is rising round the mast,
You can see through
The sail, it’s all in tatters,

And now the anchor too is loosed! (11).

According to Martin, this commentary is the most relevant evidence that Alcaeus has actually meant to fashion an unprecedented allegory; thus, he suggests that because in “the comments of Heraclitus, *no* internal evidence has been found to refute it, and much has come to light to support it [...] and because Heraclitus [was basing his...] allegorical interpretations on complete rather than fragmentary poems” (60) the modern scholar should also be content with it. I will abide by Martin’s suggestion. Since someone *interpreted* the allegory *as if*, I am persuaded that this positively adds hermeneutic value to my point.¹⁴

Apart from its reliability, a second and unsurprisingly subsequent issue, has attracted the attention of commentators on the political metaphor of the ship coined by Alcaeus: its specific object of reference, namely the actors involved in the strife at issue. Having accepted the allegorical value, the problem of the internecine opposition between the ruler and the poet’s clique could not but invalidate the option that the ship stood for the *whole* state, at least as far as the Lesbian poet was concerned. Heraclitus states: “Who would not conclude, from the image of the sea preceding this passage, that what was meant was the fear of the sea felt by a party of sailors? But it is not so. What is meant is Myrsilus and the conspiracy of tyranny being formed against the people of Mytilene” (11). From these fragments and comments one can deduce at least two sort of

¹⁴ Although I cannot delve into the history of the interpretations in the present dissertation, one philosophical and one methodological reason come to my mind when I try to substantiate my position on the case at issue: Kant as the master of the philosophy *als ob* (that is, the idea that some concepts are unattainable yet rule our way of thinking, such as god, eternity, etc...), and the very possible belonging of Heraclitus to the same, or almost the same, cultural atmosphere (therefore, a similar semiotic context) in which Horace, who reinvigorated the metaphor, had lived: the moment in which an Imperial, Roman view of history was dominant.

considerations: a) firstly, that the sea has acquired a new, harmful quality: in addition of being “unharvestable” and “comfortless” (according to Hesiod), unreckonable and lawless, and the womb of a devilish beast (as in St John’s *Book of Revelation*), it now also signifies political unrest; b) secondly, that the opposition sea/land, as a consequence, comes to imply safety for some as well as perdition for others. If the ship has acquired a political status, and if sailing at sea metaphorizes the possible downfall of a political party, conversely the land and those who are not aboard stand out as the opposite, those who are firm and secure, as we saw in Lucretius and in the *Book of Revelation*. This reassuring and sheltering land is the political domain in which dwell those who follow an established order, at times shaped as an imperial one.

The Roman poet Horace (65-8 BCE), whose poems often resort to nautical metaphors, stands among those who sparked Auden’s intellectual curiosity. Some of his poems depict the insanity of sailing over sea:

neququam deus abscidit
prudens Oceano dissociabili
terras, si tamen impiae
non tangenda rates transiliunt vada. I.3

[In vain God in his wisdom planned
The ocean separate from the land
If ships, defying his intent,
Cross the forbidden element].

The “forbidden element” Horace evokes is anticipating the messianic prophecy by the Author of the *Book of Revelation* who “notices in his vision of the new heaven and earth at the end of time [...] that ‘*there was no more sea*’” (Auden, 19). Far from any eschatological concern, Horace seems nonetheless to have absorbed, from pre-existing literary models (the often quoted and scrutinized Hesiod’s and the soon to be analyzed Alcaeus’s), the sense of insecurity and prohibition that will eventually be found in St. John’s book approximately a century later, associated with the sea and the other elements:

nil mortalibus ardui est:
caelum ipsum petimus stultitia neque
per nostrum patimur scelus
iracunda Iovem ponere fulmina. I.3 [

No barrier is too high for mortals:
In our foolhardiness we try
To escalate the very sky.
Still we presumptuously aspire,
And still with unabated ire
Jove hurls his thunderbolts of fire].

Perhaps suggesting the cosmological symmetry that his holy follower St. John will re-enact, Horace does not spare the earth the punishment he poetically inflicts on the sea:

post ignem aetheria domo
subductum macies et nova februm
terris incubuit cohors,
semotique prius tarda necessitas
leti corripuit gradum. I.3

[Fire by a wicked theft, yet when
the flame was filched from heaven's courts
wasting diseases, fresh cohorts
of fevers fell on land and sea,
and leisurely mortality
leapt with accelerated pace].

And yet, the Latin poet seems to go far beyond the borders set by the literary tradition when he decides to resort to the same nautical metaphor for two very different situations. In the first part of the very same ode I.3, his concern arises because he is worried about the possible loss of his friend, Virgil, who is sailing towards Greece:

Sic te diva potens Cypri,
Sic fratres Helenae, lucida sidera,
ventorumque regat pater
obstrictis aliis praeter Iapyga,
navis, quae tibi creditum
debes Vergilium, finibus Atticis
reddas incolumen precor,
et serves animae dimidium meae. (*Odes*, I.3)

[Fare forward, good ship, and, I pray,
May Venus, queen of Cyprus, may
Helen's bright brothers, masthead stars,
and may (all winds kept behind bars
But the north-west) the god of gales
Aeolus so direct your sails
That you who voyage promise-bound
To keep your cargo safe and sound
Deliver to his Attic goal
Virgil, and with him half my soul.]

The personal involvement of Horace in Virgil's fate seems to thwart the political use of the metaphor. Instead, the imagination of the poet turns towards the cosmological and theological elements that will determine the outcome of the trip. The ship in I.3 just needs to be as effective as by definition, that is good enough

to sail.¹⁵ The friend aboard, this well-defined individual, apparently obnubilates the peculiar collective subject and his possible fate – which was, as we saw earlier, the focus of Alcaeus – attracting the poet’s entire concern. However, in I.14, the *navis* takes on a completely different role. “O *navis*, referent in *mare te novi/fluctus!* O *quid agis? Fortiter occupa/portum!*” (“Beware, good ship! Fresh squalls are taking/You out to sea again. Start making/For harbor, run in hard”). I will come back to this oscillation between the private and public domains because I read it as a sign of partial contradiction, and I deem it possible to interpret it as a very meaningful one. The Marxist historian Victor G. Kiernan comments: “We see in him [namely, Horace] a solitary being, one of many in the Italy pulverized by the Roman war machine. We can think of this as strengthening his wish for close, lasting friendships, and his sentimental recollections of childhood days in native hills; perhaps also the ideal he came to cherish of an Italian *patria*, welding all its citizens together” (24). We already saw what effects the collapsing Mediterranean world had on the human being and poet Lucretius, and how profoundly his philosophy and poetry were influenced by it. However, Horace represents a different case. He grew up in rural Apulia, probably without knowing much about his mother. Horace’s father was a freed slave who was able to earn enough money to provide his son with good education. After moving to Rome and then Athens (it is unknown whether the father was still alive during the second change of domicile), Horace had the chance both to improve his education and prove his prowess on the battlefield. A witness of an age filled with domestic and imperial wars, the poet seems to have been deeply affected by social and political instability; yet, instead of eliciting a sharpened and disenchanting inwardness, as is the case of Lucretius, the political and cultural turmoil triggered in Horace an intense patriotic feeling. If these troubled times explain the longing for a quieter motherland, the writings of one of his favorite models, Alcaeus, were to influence his poetic repertoire (in particular the most noticeable gem by the eight-century Greek poet, the metaphor of “the ship of the State,” which Horace will reuse precisely in ode I.14¹⁶). Kiernan points out that Horace “talks as if navigation was still as dreadful a hazard as in its first dawn, when in fact, along with ship building, port facilities, and so on, it had been evolving and improving for centuries. Storms and high waves blended in his mind with political shipwreck” (127). The historian is referring here to the lines that follow those quoted above:

nonne vides ut
 nudum remigio latus,
 et malus sceleri saucius Africo,
 antennaeque gemant, ac sine funibus
 vix durare carinae
 possint imperiosus

¹⁵ N.K. Zumwalt maintains that this image represents the endeavor Virgil is taking on in writing the *Aeneid* (455).

¹⁶ The scholarship seems to disagree on the presence of the political theme within the poem. While the majority accepts the customary interpretation, a few readers put forward the hypothesis that Horace is actually referring to a woman (see W.S. Anderson 1966, and A.J. Woodman 1980). In an article following those of Anderson and Woodman, H.D. Jocelyn (1982) invalidates their hypothesis. I follow the argument of the latter scholar.

aequor? (I.14)

[Can you not see how
both your sides have been stripped of oars
and how, damaged by storm-winds out of
Africa,
mast and yard-arms are groaning, and the
hull, without ropes to gird it, can hardly
hold against the too masterful Ocean?].

Kiernan seems to believe that the poet gets carried away by his inclination to describe politics through poetic metaphor, and, in so doing, his rudimentary knowledge of sea industry causes him to overlook the developments that have occurred after Alcaeus's writings. Writes the historian: "The battered ship of state was often in his mind—it had been Alcaeus's favorite image, but Horace was less familiar than his forerunner with nautical detail" (67). Although I would assume that the art of poetry does not need to borrow only the latest technologically advanced literary devices from daily life, and the poet obviously remains absolute sovereign of his way of representing his subject matter, one cannot help but notice the similarity between Horace's ship and the one portrayed by the very same poet whose safety is wished for in Ode I.3, Virgil. *Aeneid* V, describes "the sacrifice of the hero" (Quint, 86-7) Palinurus, helmsman of Aeneas's boat that is sailing towards the 'promised land,' Italy. After being poisoned by the god Somnus, the latter

super incumbens
cum puppis parte reuulsa
cumque gubernaculo liquidas proiecit in
undas
praecipitem ac socios nequiquam saepe
uocantem. (Virgil, V, 858-860)

[Somnus leaned over him and flung him
down
In the clear water, breaking off with him
A segment of the stern and steering oar].

The resemblance between the two poetic episodes urges the reader to wonder whether the Latin friends were so close as to share even the same level of incompetence in things practical in addition to sharing friendship and literary skill. This option seems somewhat unrealistic. On the contrary, it seems that what influences the descriptions of analogous episodes by Horace and Virgil (I will focus more extensively on the latter in the next chapter) has little to do with their respective insights on sea industry and nautical craftsmanship; instead, it illustrates a common symbolic range. The fact that Alcaeus meticulously depicts his ships, and Horace and Virgil do not, has less to do with their knowledge of

navigation than with the influential semiotic contexts in which they write and with the following political situation in which they live. As Vegetti maintains, credo non vada mai dimenticato che anche il testo teorico viene prodotto in un contesto semiotico, ha cioè la natura di un messaggio, che impone immediatamente una serie di domande sui suoi scopi, sui pubblici che vengono «mirati» dal testo, sulle modalità della sua circolazione. Valida in generale per ogni testo, questa osservazione mi pare lo sia particolarmente per quelli antichi, data la fragilità delle istituzioni entro le quali la cultura veniva elaborata e diffusa (1983, 12).

Thus, the message that Horace's *Odes* convey cannot be fully understood if one fails to contextualize it. The *Odes* are evidence of the ebb and tide in which the poet found himself, at the rise of Augustus and his empire to detriment of the faction of Cassius and Brutus (the faction that the poet first embraced). In the wake of the fateful loss at Philippi, Horace abandoned not only his military career and, more picturesquely, part of his shield ("*relicta non bene parmula*," *Odes*, II.3), but also his previously chosen leaders, and the shift from the Republican to the Imperial side is reflected in his poems at a detectable extent. As Kiernan emphasizes, the *Odes* "breathe a different spirit from that of any of his other, more earthbound, writings. [...] The essence of this new writing was Roman, or, as he aspired to make it, Italian" (61). However, the poetic development came at a price. On the one hand longing for a safe and sound state, and, on the other, perhaps urged by Octavian Augustus to support the empire more explicitly ("Hints may have been reaching the poet that more verses on patriotic and loyal lines would not be amiss," Kiernan, 65), seemingly and reluctantly obeying his ruler, Horace began to write poems filled with subtle, mordant flavor. "Contradictions," Kiernan calls them: "Horace's world has grown too vast and complicated to be contained within any rational system either of government or thought. [...] Some of his ideas appear to revolve in complex circles" (95). Internecine and external wars, and personal fall and rise, conjured up to interlace his fascinating and, at the same time, bedazzling poetry. Although well advanced in his allegedly conscious intellectual maturity and freedom, Horace has left remnants of his, past and present, shortcomings and pinnacles, while poetically portraying the world as he was experiencing it:

Horace called on men to turn away from effeminate luxury to austere simplicity. But this could only be bearable if it had a collective purpose, which could only be war and conquest, rewarded by fresh plunder, more gold, deeper decadence. There was an insoluble contradiction between worship of empire and condemnation of the wealth with which it loaded the upper class (Kiernan, 97-98).

The historian touches upon Horace's failure to reconcile his newly acquired status of poet of the regime with his long-standing contempt for the "*profanum vulgus*" (*Odes*, 3.1), contempt being triggered, among other things, by the fact that the

populace – and his ruler Augustus, I contend – does not acknowledge the role and the importance goddesses *Necessitas* and *Fors* (Fortune) have on daily life and on human business (“*aequa lege Necessitas/sortitur insignis et imos*,” 3.1). Both in the *Odes* (for example, 2.3) and in the *Satires* (Book 1, 1 and 2 for instance), in fact, Horace laments the greed his fellow countrymen overtly display for wealth and commodities (which subsequently they almost carelessly squander) as though they constitute inextinguishable supplies. The poet’s contempt often bursts out and enlivens his poems, water and sailors shape it:

Delicta maiorum immeritus lues,
Romane, donec templa refeceris
Aedesque labentis deorum et
Foeda nigro simulacra fumo.
Dis te minorem quod geris, imperas:
Hinc omne principium, huc refer exitum:
Di multa neglecti dederunt
Hesperiae mala luctuosae. [...]

Fecunda culpae saecula nuptias [...]
Hoc fonte derivata clades
In pariam populumque fluxit. [...]

Sed iussa coram non sine conscio
Surgit marito, seu vocat institor
Seu navis Hispanae magister,
Dedecorum pretiosus emptor.
(3.6, 1-8, 17, 19-20, 29-32)

[Roman, you may be innocent of guilt,
Yet you shall pay for each ancestral crime,
Until our mouldering temples are rebuilt
And the gods’ statues cleansed of smoke and
grime.
Only as servant of the gods in heaven
Can you rule the earth. The seed of action is
Theirs, and the fruit. Slighted, have they not
given
Suffering Italy multiple miseries? [...]

This age has proved fertile in evil. [...]
And from this fouled source burst
The river of ruin that has flooded Rome.
[...]

Only the husband seeming not to note,
At any man’s command she leaves her
place,

Pedlar or captain of some Spanish boat—
Whoever pays the price of her disgrace.]

The hiatus existing between his “genuine patriotic feelings” (Kiernan, 96) and “the handicap that has beset so many, of loving his country but not liking many of its inhabitants” (96) constantly seethes through the poet’s lines. Despite, or perhaps because of, his ‘institutional’ role of one of the poets of the imperial court, Horace seems constantly to sharpen rather than smooth the edges that separate him from the materialistic horde of the Roman citizens. In a sudden – if, again, perhaps rhapsodic and conflicting – pre-Christian, pre-Franciscan mood, he even ventures to demand that

vel nos in Capitolium,
quo clamor vocat et turba faventium,
vel nos in mare proximum
gemmas et lapides, aurum et inutile,
summi materiem mali,
mittamus, scelerum si bene paenitet. (Odes,
3.24)

[To the Capitol,
let us bring our jewels, our gauds,
our gold (that useless, deadly thing, the
matter and the cause of our great ill)
and thereby win all Rome’s applause,
or, if we’d truly be repentant,
toss our treasures in the nearest sea].

Arguably, what Horace is asking to toss away is, more correctly, Augustus’s warfare (although, once again, consistency fails to spread over his poems, or, differently said, it is, in all likelihood, hard to oppose the politics of the master of the world day in and day out, above all while you are eating at his table), not because it is wrong per se, but because it invigorates and flips around that ravenous feeling for gold and power that may endanger the state (and, *en passant*, the lives of some of his closest friends, such as Virgil and Maecenas, not to mention his own). If, as some critics assert (Pasquali among them, see Pasquali, 34-7.), ode 1.14 has been written in the wake of the battle of Actium, when Augustus was preparing to chase the fleeting Antony, then the poem reflects the fear of its author that the emperor’s decision might jeopardize the alleged stability just attained, which Horace likely believed was bestowed upon Rome by means of the benevolence of *Fors* and *Necessitas*, albeit through Augustus. Within this historical frame, the possible wreck of the ship of State that Horace foresees, and is afraid of, at the dawn of this new imperial enterprise, reveals itself to be more than just a scenic and rhetorical allegory: it shows the poet’s concern about the Roman political and economic system that is founded upon the stormy sea of war and conquest, while conveying his personal uncertainties about his own authorship to such a claim. Thus, on the one hand Horace tries to dialectically

mystify his own uprooted political subjectivity and minority standpoint vis-à-vis the totalitarian Empire worldview that thoroughly rules his life and time, while, on the other, he is *de facto* prudently opposing the mainstream. Shrewdly leaning on myth (Venus, “Helen’s bright brothers”), nature (sea, fire), and literary tradition (Alcaeus), he attempts to warn his powerful reader(s) about the risks involving incautious political enterprise, and resorts to past imagery as though it possessed soothsaying and convincing power. Consequently, Alcaeus’s ship of State becomes, in the forge of the Latin poet, a field of tension in which both individual and collective fate are at stake.

The allegorical object, rewritten in such a way, escalates to what Jameson might call an *ideologeme*, “that is, the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourse of social classes” (1981, 76). Accordingly, by means of the *ideologeme*, and through the conceptual viewpoint it bears on, Horace emphasizes his individual incongruity as well as his political disharmony within the larger picture of the Imperial Rome and its social and political system. In fact, this ambiguity is metaphorically remarked by the *actual* presence of Virgil *on board* “and with him half [of Horace] soul” (I.3, 10), when coupled with the “entangled detachment,” as it were, of the spectator in I.14 that Horace himself performs. The two contrary positions seem to perfectly portray the ideological disorientation and the human, almost Epicurean, resignation that the poet is experiencing. Unlike Alcaeus and Lucretius, who staunchly opted for either one side or the other (the former on board, the latter on the shore), Horace, torn apart politically as well as philosophically, can neither completely embrace the imperial party nor totally reject it.¹⁷ He sails figuratively while he advises not to, he longs for a more peaceful and unprivileged lifestyle (as in II.16) while he lauds Augustus’s strength (“*praesens divus habebitur/Augustus adiectis Britannis/imperio gravibusque Persis*” III.5) and the courage of Regulus. Ultimately, all this uneasiness and pessimism involving individual and political fate cluster together, and the poet draws intensely into it. Once again, myth, nature, and poetry, are the boats that rescue him from drowning:

Phoebus volentem proelia me loqui
Victas et urbis increpuit lyra,
Ne parva Tyrrhenum per aequor
Vela darem. [...]

Ianum Quirini clausit et ordinem
Rectum evaganti frena licentiae
Iniecit emovique culpas
Et veteres revocavit artis,

per quas Latinum nomen et Italae

¹⁷ Similarly, Quint maintains that “the *Aeneid* also uncovers the contradictions in the Augustan ideology that shapes it, the mutual incompatibility of *clementia* and *pietas* [...]” and, much like Horace’s poetry, “the *Aeneid* [is] questioning the Augustan regime and its party line *from the inside* and in its own terms.” (1993, 52-53). The relationships between the poets must have been very tight.

cervere vires, famaue et imperi
porrecta maiestas ad ortus
solis ab Hesperio cubili. [...]

nosque et profestis lucibus et sacris
inter iocosi munera Liberi
cum prole matronisque nostris,
rite deos prius apprecati,

virtute functos more patrum duces
Lydis remixto carmine tibiis
Troiamque et Anchisen et almae
Progeniem Veneris canemus. (IV.15)

[Wars won and towns sacked—high were the themes
I had
Planned; then Apollo twanged his rebuking lyre:
“Stop! Little sails like yours should never
Challenge the Tuscan, the epic ocean.” [...]

Keeps Janus’ arcade empty of warfare and
Shuts tight the gates there; bridles the runaway
Beast, License, strayed far off the true road;
Banishes vice and recalls the ancient

Rules whereby Rome’s name, Italy’s majesty,
Fame, strength and empire spread from the uttermost
West, where the sun goes down at evening,
East to the shores of his resurrection. [...]

We, too, for our part, workdays and holidays,
Alike, among gay Bacchus’s gifts to man,
Prayer duly made where prayer is due, shall
Gather the women and children round us

And do as our forefathers did: Lydian
Pipe aiding voice, sing hymns to the heroes who
Died well, to Troy, Anchises, kindly
Venus and Venus’s great descendants].

Horace disguised Fortune and Necessity under the “rebuking lyre” of Apollo that reproached him and his ability to sing the praise of the Roman Empire. Significantly, he rephrased in symbolic terms his alleged poetic failure as an unattainable seafaring through the difficult “Tuscan, epic ocean.”¹⁸ In so doing, he was setting the limited control of individual agency within the cosmological –

¹⁸ The adjective ‘epic’ is a poetic license on the end of the translator, however.

hence, out of command – order, echoing the hopelessness Hesiod saw in the enterprise his wretched brother Perses planned. However, Time, and Imperial history, did not pass and left its marks in vain, since the time of the Greek city-states. Whereas the self-confidence of Hesiod was paramount, and his pre-political belief in the celestial and terrestrial concord definitely unshaken; conversely, the worries typical of the Roman age and his own downfalls indeed undermined Horace’s trust in gods (apart from Necessity and Fortune, as we already saw) and people, inspiring a more historicizing and secular worldview, as his most famous motto, *Carpe diem*, blatantly testifies. Verses of sporadic, contingent celebration *à la* Alcaeus are shrewdly interspersed throughout his poetry (with the line “*Nunc est bibendum*,” I.37, begins the *political* ode that celebrates Cleopatra’s suicide), and so are gems of pessimism (“*immortalia ne speres, monet annus et alium/quae rapit hora diem*,” IV.7 [each day-snatching hour says, “Limit your hopes: you must die.”]). Overwhelmed by the unresolvable contradiction of performing his role of Imperial poet (whose favor nonetheless went to a more ordinary and serene life, at least during the “Augustan Era”), while having recognized the historical power of Necessity as matchless entity, he had art as the only solace, as he was gloomily afloat in the “Tuscan ocean” in which all of us, eventually, will sink.

5. Myth to Ideologeme: Age of Change

Le dottrine debbono cominciare da quando
cominciano le materie che trattano.
G. Vico, *Principj della Scienza Nuova*, I.2. CVI

It seems appropriate to finish this chapter by rephrasing the cultural interpretation I have been suggesting in the previous pages, in order to strengthen its validity and overall consistency. The golden rule that any cultural product carries a greater load of messages than announced or overtly exposed has been paramount in my analysis. A few objects of study have *allegorically* met and confronted each other on a common arena, and then left, like new Horaces, remarkable remnants behind them. “In the beginning was the myth;” or, as Vico would say, “the heroic myths, which were true histories of the heroes and heroic customs which have flourished in every nation during the age of barbarism. Homer’s two epics prove to be two treasuries, in which we may discover the natural law of the Greeks when they were still a barbarous people” (1999, 6).¹⁹ Accordingly, one could possibly delve into cultural history from the starting point of archaic poetry, once the semantic horizon to which it belongs is recovered, and this is possible only once some preliminary considerations are set. First and foremost, while digging into the past by dint of current concepts, such as “science,” “myth,” or “history” in order to recognize and identify cultural patterns, one must contextualize those very same concepts. For example, Heidegger maintains,

¹⁹ The original sounds far more enticing and insightful, at least to my Italian ear: “si dimostra le favole essere state vere e severe istorie de’ costumi delle antichissime genti di Grecia [...] sicché i due poemi d’Omero si truovano essere due grandi tesori di scoperte del diritto naturale delle genti greche ancor barbare” (253-254).

When we use the word “science” today, it means something essentially different from the *doctrina* and *scientia* of the Middle Ages, and also from the Greek *epistēmē*. Greek science was never exact, precisely because, in keeping with its essence, it could not be exact and did not need to be exact. [...] [F]or the Greek understanding of the essence of body and place and of the relation between the two rests upon a different interpretation of beings and hence conditions a correspondingly different kind of seeing and questioning of natural events (1977, 117).

The German philosopher is pointing out how the translation of ancient conceptual terms in contemporary language can be misleading, in so far as it leaves behind the *essential* context in which such terms have been thought and experienced. As everyone knows, Heidegger considered the history of metaphysics up to the twentieth century as characterized by the obliviousness in regard to its “essence,” which, according to the German philosopher, springs from the Being. The basic question of Truth and Falsity unfolds in a complete different way if one analyzes it from Heidegger’s perspective. Vico’s statement refers precisely to the emergence of poetry as symbolic language whose imagery, far from being untrue, reveals the only reliable resource that posterity can hold veracious and accountable for a literary analysis *of that peculiar and precise lapse of time*. In his “new scientific” (more accurately, anthropological) investigation, Vico, following an ancient Egyptian chronology, maintains that three different ages have characterized history of humankind as collectivity (“umana vita sociale,” as quoted below): firstly, the age of gods; secondly, the age of heroes, and, finally, the age of men. An identifiable language was spoken at any given age. At the time in which Homer was writing (“the age of heroes”), the language was symbolic: hence, the abundance of Μυθοί. According to the Neapolitan philosopher, there is a continuous thread running underneath and connecting the three ages and languages. Says Vico: “È necessario che vi sia nella natura delle cose umane *una lingua mentale comune a tutte le nazioni*, la quale uniformemente intenda la sostanza delle cose agibili nell’umana vita socievole” (II.xxii, emphasis added). During the age of heroes, the myth becomes the *opening* in which the “common conceptual language” speaks and through which the world acquires its general form and solidity. In this occurrence, the “heroic poet” reveals himself to be, in Greek terms, *poietès*, that is, a crafty artisan whose colorful, mythical language is the key tool with which he operates.²⁰ Aesthetic and literary analysis needs, hence, “To re-evaluate myths, to re-evaluate them in the sense of bestowing on them that which, in the view of many people, had been only fable and figment – the value of events that had actually occurred” (Dorfles, 582). The language in which the heroic *poietès* forged his aesthetic view is infused with this sort of “real myths” – passed on through what we use to consider mere rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, parable, and allegory. Nonetheless, its symbolism does not

²⁰ Gillo Dorfles, rephrasing Cleanth Brooks (*Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, 1939), says: “Poetic experience is at least partially communicable; the poet, however, should be referred to as *poietès*, and not as an expositor or communicator” (580).

misrepresent the message. On the contrary, “Metaphors and similitudes [...] constitute the sole mode of communication possible for the “heroic” period; but we may further assume that they are the real and authentic mode of aesthetic communication in all epochs” (Dorfles, 584). Vico’s symbolic language of heroic poets prevents – for the time period considered, that is, the age of heroes – Nietzsche’s criticism that holds truth as nothing but

A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage, seem to a nation fixed, canonic, and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions; worn out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses; coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal (180).²¹

Two steps need to be taken to further shore up Vico’s point and to avoid the ensnarement in the viscous cobweb of illusionary, poetic and extra-moral “un-truth” Nietzsche foresees and diagnoses: firstly, historicize and, subsequently, interpret.

A) History and Context: Historicizing the Text

There is no “zero level of meaning,” a proper sense perceptible out of any context. The text is illegible: It is the context that activates the system of differences, which in turn makes the text readable.

G. Stellardi, *Heidegger and Derrida on Philosophy and Metaphor*, 57.

To historicize means, as far as pre-Christian poetry is concerned, to *imagine*, and this is a bifurcated road: “It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle. [...] [However,] to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (Wittgenstein, Aph. 19). Following Vico, Heidegger, and Dorfles, I contend that when the poets of the age of the heroes *aestheticize* their “forms of life” and time, they are first and foremost historicizing in the only way

²¹ More to the point, one could also state that Nietzsche “cheats” on his reader from the very beginning. When he uses metaphor in order to define truth, he is actually setting up, slyly, a literary *myse en abime* because, in the process, metaphor also undergoes a modification to become... metaphor! What is, in fact, truth when considered (that is, *metaphorized*) as “illusions,” “worn out metaphors,” or “effaced coins?” It is obvious that the three nouns used here *cannot* belong to the same semantic group. The exchangeability of truth and coin or illusion is possible if, and only if, metaphor is already at work (metaphor, as we know, is *nomos*, not *physis*); hence, metaphor must belong to a different domain. As Stellardi says, “If *metaphoric meaning* is understood in dichotomic opposition to *proper meaning*, all meaning is metaphoric and proper meaning simply does not exist” (57-8). Nietzsche deploys the same cunning ruse that, according to Borges, Sheherazade spent when, in *Thousand and One Nights*, at some point, she told her own story, making the book cyclic and, accordingly, perpetual (J.L. Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” in Id., *Ficciones*). The only difference rests on the fact that, in the latter case, the reader quickly realizes he has been served a piece of sublime *fiction*.

possible in their cultural and historical moment. In other words, they are following the road of *episteme* (Parmenides' "truth"), rejecting that of *doxa* ("opinion"). The allegorical network of imagery (composed of metaphors and similes) the poets have employed suitably plays around the veil of Maya, alternately lifting or dropping it and, in so doing, un/veiling the social and political configuration and the intellectual's correlation. In a seemingly contradictory way, Vico states that

tutto va di seguito a quella dignità: che «l'uomo ignorante si fa regola dell'universo», siccome negli esempi arrecati egli di se stesso ha fatto un intiero mondo. Perché come la metafisica ragionata insegna che «*homo intelligendo fit omnia*», così questa metafisica fantastica dimostra che «*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*» e forse con più di verità detto questo che quello, perché l'uomo con l'intendere spiega la sua mente e comprende esse cose, ma non intendere egli di sé fa esse cose e, col trasformandovisi, lo diventa (Vico, II.II.2.i).

Vico's "imaginative metaphysics" escapes Aristotelian definition of metaphysics as the branch of philosophy that deals with the "invisible" and the "untouchable" (which both lie "*meta ta physika*," beyond or after the objects of physics, in other words, as everyone knows). Because of its unconscious symbiosis, this poetry establishes and implements the connection between the aesthetic and the historical – regardless of the challenging and doubtful "truthfulness" of such a connection²² – as the poet is moving further along Parmenides's road of Truth mentioned above (the one marked by *episteme*). When Vico takes the unconscious poet over the conscious philosopher or scientist, he is therefore making an act of attribution that displaces the discussion of the content of poetry away from the field of ancient rhetoric ("white mythology," that is, more or less, metaphysics, in Derridean terms) or modern science and places it in the center of a completely different contest – and context: the scene of world history ("*ta physika*," just mentioned). Precisely "*non intelligendo*," as it were, the poet "becomes" the world in which he lives, as his sensitivity attunes to the environment (and its politics, and economy, and etc...) in which he is plunged and swallowed up, and his "godlike" voice bestows us his unbridled ideology.²³ Allegorical ancient poetry counters the possible risk of "white mythology" precisely to the extent that it participates in the connection mentioned above. This final consideration ushers in the second step of the method, the interpretive.

B) Interpretation

Taking a position, making an interpretation, cannot be avoided.

²² On this issue, see Heidegger's *The Essence of Truth*.

²³ Vico is clearly following a well-established path in the history of philosophy, dating back to pre-Socratic σοφία. One can recognize, at the very least, Xenophanes and his condemnation of anthropomorphism of gods, the Sophist Protagoras, who considered the man "measure of all things on earth," up to the Platonic *Ione*, in which Socrates claims that gods speak by means of unsuspecting rhapsode. Aristotle and his metaphysical writings are also present, unmistakably. This consideration, of course, all but increases the richness of Vico's argument.

Moreover, [...] historical contingency does not disable interpretive argument, because it is truly the only ground it can have. We are always arguing at particular moments in specific places to certain audiences. Our beliefs and commitments are no less real because they are historical, and the same holds for our interpretations. If no foundationalist theory will resolve disagreements over poems or treaties, we must always argue our cases. In fact, that is all we can ever do.

S. Mailloux, "Interpretation,"

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"Interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretive options are either openly or implicitly in conflict" (Jameson 1981, 13). Once again, meaningful analysis seems to be found exclusively within a field in which divergent, opposing forces play against each other, likewise the epic, heroic confrontation Homer recollected and handed over. The object of my interpretation has primarily been the Wittgensteinian "form of life" that language lays out in the works I studied, as well as the point of rupture and contradiction that hesitantly transpire from them. Hence, my inquiry coped with a scenario qualified yet "politically" incomplete because primeval and/or in progress, in which political agency, individual as well as collective, acted as either "liquefied" within a cosmological order (such are the cases of Hesiod, St. John), or teleologically impotent and with resignation (Achilles of Homer, Horace, the Roman citizens). The blatant social and cultural difference in which the works I scrutinized have been produced (ancient Greek society, based on city-state system whose ideological theory was either theology or metaphysics, as opposed to Imperial and imperialist Rome that was attempting to draw a foundational epic), made paramount to define as accurately as possible the semiotic context and its procedure, while remembering that "Procedure does not mean [...] merely method or methodology. For every procedure already requires an open sphere in which it moves. And it is precisely the opening up of such a sphere that is the fundamental event in research" (Heidegger 1977, 118). If the Greek case can safely be assessed as lacking an overarching *secular* structure, the latter obviously does possess one (Imperial Rome marks the most distant point from the time before the flight of the gods), and its influence (or lack thereof) played a relevant role in the definition of the representational toolkit of the authors considered. The *myth* – under the guise of the metaphor, or of "imaginative metaphysics" – as a basic and scientific part of language *of ancient times*, has been accounted for as both the condensation of epochal knowledge and as term of allegorical comparison and investigation. This exercise of *consistent diachronic inquiry*, so to say, has been masterfully explicated by Derrida (although I would substitute his use of "metaphor" with myth or *ideologeme*, as suggested *supra*):

To read within a concept the hidden history of a metaphor is to privilege *diachrony* at the expense of the system, and is also to

invest in the *symbolist* conception of language [...]: no matter how deeply buried, the link of the signifier to the signified has had both to be and to remain a link of natural necessity of analogical participation, of resemblance. [...] In this critique of philosophical language, to take an interest in metaphor—in this particular figure—is therefore also to take a symbolist stand. It is above all to take an interest in the nonsyntactic, nonsystematic pole of language, that is, to take an interest in semantic “depth,” [...] However, the issue is [...] to deconstruct the metaphysical and rhetorical schema at work in [t]his critique, not in order to reject and discard them but to reinscribe them otherwise, and especially in order to begin to identify the historico-problematic terrain on which philosophy systematically has been asked for the metaphorical rubrics of its concepts (1982, 215).

Derrida makes clear, in this lengthy quotation, some of the points in which his work is connected with the Heideggerian scrutiny of Western metaphysics as well as his attention to historic materialism (which he will confirm later on writing *Spectres of Marx*, during a negative conjuncture for the works and thought of the German philosopher). Furthermore, precisely the interest in the semantic depth and the identification of “historico-problematic” issues provides the trajectory along which Jameson can encounter the French philosopher, though the differences (perhaps more in terms of code than conceptually) between them are also noticeable. In sum, it appears utterly clear to me that both Heidegger, and Derrida, and Jameson converge to a significant extent, at least as far as the “Question Concerning Metaphor” is involved.²⁴ They all interpret and re-inscribe the Real (or Being, or the *Écriture*) within their respective theoretical frames, in which, as Derrida says, “symbolist conception of language” plays a fundamental role. Moreover, their debt towards Vico and his “scientific” and, at times, visionary metaphysics that re-interprets ancient culture in the light of its own “heroic” language seems as well total, and their proximity consistent.

These are some of the poets that spoke for me the language of the lost gods, a language in which the myth-turned-metaphor recapitulates the symbolic intensity and the semantic richness of the historical time of its utterance—likewise the first ten words of the *Letter to Romans* by St. Paul, in a unique interpretation by Giorgio Agamben, recapitulates the entire message of the letter. A Wittgensteinian city, the language amasses old and new houses, crooked and straight streets, to form a complex labyrinth where individual and collectivity mesh forcibly – that is, effectively and compulsorily. In turn, the city soaks up

²⁴ Few doubts (if any) undermine scholars’ awareness of the debt Derrida has in regard to Heidegger. Although the latter has scarcely mentioned metaphor in his writings, I agree with the thesis that maintains that “The metaphoric power of Heidegger’s text is richer and more significant than Heidegger’s explicit theses on metaphor” (Stellardi, rephrasing the opinion of Paul Ricoeur, in Stellardi, 93). As for Jameson, the quotation by Derrida seems to me considerably in agreement with the symbolic reading—to be laid out in the subsequent *Political Unconscious*—of literary works by the Marxist thinker.

and exposes symbolic features, belonging to the language, which make it an *ideologeme* (a contemporary, *political* allegory):

La città è quel luogo speciale, topologicamente singolare, dove si manifesta la potenza dell'intelletto comune nella produzione di parole, sentimenti, leggi che esteriorizzano, per così dire, le qualità specifiche del luogo, il *genius loci*. [...] La città non è solo memoria nel senso della cosa che ricordiamo, ma è anche memoria nel senso di capacità collettiva di ricordare, d'esercitare il ricordo come facoltà pubblica (Piperno, 89-90, 95).

However, this is another story.