FROM BAROQUE ALLEGORY TO ROMANTIC SUBLIME:
WRITING, IMAGES, AND SUBJECTIVITY IN
TESAURO, VICO, AND NOVALIS

by

ALESSIO LERRO

A Dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School-New Brunswick
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Comparative Literature
written under the direction of

Prof. Paola Gambarota

And approved by

Prof. Paola Gambarota
Prof. Martha Helfer
Prof. Laura Sanguineti White
Prof. Massimo Lollini

New Brunswick, New Jersey
October 2013
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION


by ALESSIO LERRO

Dissertation Director:  
Prof. Paola Gambarota

In this dissertation I argue that, from the Baroque allegory to the Romantic sublime, the formation of hybrid strategies of representation based on the interplay of words and images determine a new idea of the reader as a poetic and textual construction. The subject of the work of art is no longer placed outside, but inscribed within the work itself. This new position of the reader implies a transformation of the modalities of reception of both images and words. I consider the crisis of the institute of allegory in the 17th century as the point of departure for the formation of such hybrid languages and I illustrate how they contribute to design a new image of the modern reader. In the first chapter, I analyze the structure of the Baroque allegory in paintings, poetry, and in treatises on art. I focus on the emergence of a new sensibility toward the role played by the subject in the appreciation of the work of art. I argue that the theory of conceit, especially in the form of imprese and family crests, is a direct response to
the crisis of the classical institution of allegory. In the second chapter I propose a reading of Giambattista Vico’s *New Science* as a journey of aesthetic education of the subject from the Baroque conceit to a pre-romantic idea of sublime. In the third chapter I argue that the Romantic sublime is the evolution of the problematic relationship between conceit and allegory. I focus on Novalis’ novel *Heinrich Von Ofterdingen* that I regard as the attempt to turn the experience of the sublime into a textual experience. In synthesis, my dissertation traces the development of a new rhetoric of subjectivity from Baroque allegory to Romantic sublime. My analysis is focused on figures of speech, narrative structures, and visual representations. The goal is not to create an authoritative interpretation of three centuries of cultural history, but rather to present indicative cases of works that blend the critical borders of categories such as allegory and sublime that have so far not been considered as contiguous to each other.
DEDICATION

To Kristen, my blue flower.

In the mountains the shortest way is from peak to peak,
but for that route you must have long legs.

Nietzsche
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT**

**DEDICATION**

**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

**INTRODUCTION: THE TEMPTATION**

1. **THE BAROQUE SUBJECT BETWEEN ALLEGORY AND CONCEIT**
   1.1 The Counter-Reformist Reaction to the Baroque
   1.2 Benjamin and the Baroque Fragment
   1.3 Artemisia Gentileschi and the Allegory of Painting
   1.4 Caravaggio and the Illusory Allegory of Mary Magdalene
   1.5 Sacred Poetry and the Unfulfilled Allegory
   1.6 Tesauro and the Heroic Subject of the Impresa

2. **VICO’S PHILOSOPHICAL SUBJECT AS A BAROQUE READER**
   2.1 Vico’s dipintura and the Baroque Conceit
   2.2 The Heroic Subject as Ideal Reader of the New Science
   2.3 The Subject of the New Science between Euclid and Daedalus
   2.4 The Heroic “Baroque” Reader and the Experience of the Sublime

3. **NOVALIS AND THE SUBLIME AS A READING EXPERIENCE**
   3.1 The Allegory and the Hieroglyph
   3.2 The Blue Flower between Metaphor and Metonymy
   3.3 The Unfulfilled Erwartung and the Sublime Erfüllung

**CONCLUSION: THE PORCUPINE**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Artemisia Gentileschi, Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting 38
Sofonisba Anguissola, Self-Portrait 41
Johanness Gumpp, Self Portrait 41
Caravaggio, Martha and Mary 44
Tesauro, illustration from “Il Cannocchiale Aristotelico” 64
Frontispieces of Vico’s New Science and Tesauro’s Cannochiale Aritotelico 82
INTRODUCTION: THE TEMPTATION

What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art. If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence. What is needed is a vocabulary—a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary—for forms. [...] What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.

S. Sontag

Since this conviction -that no truth is discoverable here on earth- appeared before my soul I have given up reading. I have placed my room in idleness, sat down at the open window, run out of the house, in the end by the relentlessness in me I was driven to the cafés and tobacco houses [...].

Kleist

This dissertation is the report of an intense reading experience that has characterized a conspicuous part of my personal and academic life. To justify and explain why and how this dissertation came into being in this particular fashion, I need to explain what sort of intellectual problem was raised in my mind by the encounter with the Baroque and Romantic culture since, as Vico famously notes, “the nature of things is nothing but their coming into being at certain times and in certain fashions.” This dissertation is a response to a dominant sensation in my experience as a reader of Baroque and Romanticism: relentlessness. A sense of uneasiness and unrest always accompanied the elation that a poem by Tommaso Campanella, or a page by Schlegel, inevitably would invoke in me. Baroque and Romanticism laid before my eyes an abundant world of words and images, hypotyposis and sophisticated abstractions, which would constantly not simply escape my understanding (an always debatable concept), but my own ability to clearly see in between the folds of the texts. The difficulty of phrasing and
describing the object of my observations led me to restlessly read texts after texts, in the quest for a continuity of images which would help me to train my eyes until I was able to finally focus. The more I saw, the less I was able to write and, reversely, the more I wrote the less clear my view of the text became. Like Kleist, in a sense, I gave up reading. The problem I faced was to find a theoretical foundation to the opposing feelings of pleasure and dissatisfaction caused by my inability to word what I saw.

The turning point of my inquiry was realizing that at the basis of my conflict there was perhaps something inherently ascribable to the forms in which Baroque and Romanticism appeared to me. I then understood that my limit in describing my experience as a reader, of phrasing eloquently the nature of what literature managed to make me see, was due to the fact that Baroque and Romantic art and writings were actually presenting me with a new strategy of seeing, with a new model of a reader who had to redefine his own critical vocabulary to reposition himself in relation to the work of art. Between the 17th and 18th century a dramatic change occurs in the rhetorical and visual organization of the work of art.

In this dissertation I argue that, from the Baroque allegory to the Romantic sublime, the formation of hybrid strategies of representation based on the interplay of words and images determines a new idea of the reader as a poetic and textual construction. The subject of the work of art is no longer placed outside, but inscribed within the work itself. This new position of the reader implies a transformation of the modality of reception of both images and words
that, no longer the object of exegetical readings, become the mirror of the working itself of the poetic imagination. I argue that by representing its own working, the Baroque and Romantic work of art becomes the getaway for a representation of subjectivity as a work of art itself. The analysis contained in this dissertation pertains to the formal modalities through which subjectivity is progressively represented as a constitutive part of the work of art. My reading is therefore the attempt, to use a formula of almost Marxist reminiscence, to resolve a theoretical problem through a practical activity: precisely by describing an experience of reading and by unfolding my own net of rhetorical associations between Baroque and Romantic strategies of representation.

This journey would have never started without the trigger represented by Walter Benjamin’s The Origin of The German Tragic Drama where, for the first time, a comparison between Baroque and Romanticism is formulated. My reading is thus both indebted and in dialogical opposition to Benjamin’s intuition. In the Prologue to his work, Benjamin writes:

[In the allegory] the Baroque reveals itself to be the sovereign opposite of classicism, as which hitherto, only romanticism has been acknowledged. And we should not resist the temptation of finding out those features that are in common to both of them. Both Romanticism as much as Baroque, are concerned not so much with providing a corrective to classicism, as to art itself.¹

In many ways, this dissertation is the story of how I progressively understood this passage. Benjamin invites the reader to surrender to the temptation (Versuchung) of looking into what Baroque and Romanticism have in common.

The first question to me was to understand why this would be a temptation, but for a while the real temptation was to figure out what exactly Benjamin meant in defining Baroque and Romanticism as a “corrective” (Korrektiv) to art.

I knew that Korrektiv was hardly to be intended as the process of “making something wrong right.” To Benjamin, Baroque and Romanticism live in the aftermath of the crisis of Classicism, intended as a system of authoritative figures of speech and of a defined relationship between signifier and signified. Benjamin describes the happening of something that from Baroque to Romanticism requires adjustments, repairs, and remedies. This could be understood, as Benjamin does, as the end of classicism. Yet, both are not simply a response to the void of authority left by the crisis of classicism, but rather a way to amend something in the making of art itself. This is perhaps the master temptation of them all: modifying the relationship between art and subjectivity. I thus believe the question should be phrased like this: what if instead of being two different remedies to a common problem, Baroque and Romanticism are forms of the same process through which the work of art and subjectivity have defined each other? This dissertation strives to answer this question by proposing a comparative reading of the rhetorical strategies through which Baroque and Romanticism represent the new relationship between art and subjectivity, which begins with the crisis of classicism.

The overarching argument of this dissertation is that the crisis of the institution of allegory represents the departing point for the formation of hybrid languages based on the interplay of words and images that, from the Baroque
conceit to the Romantic sublime, help to design a new image of the modern reader and appreciator of art as a figure inscribed within the work of art itself. According to this thesis, Baroque and Romanticism need to be read in terms of an aesthetic continuity, whereas Benjamin proposes a comparison based on the similarities of their approach to the problem of art as opposed to classicism. The continuity between Baroque and Romanticism is given by the evolution of a similar rhetorical pattern traceable to the relationship between words and images that start with the Baroque interpretation of the allegorical structure. The interplay between the two is the attempt to bridge the gap between sign and meaning, materiality of language and its abstract significance.

From Baroque to Romanticism, the hiatus between signifier and signified becomes the affirmation of the subject’s poetic power of redesigning the borders between art and selfhood through the invention of always more ingenuous aesthetic forms. According to Benjamin, Baroque and Romanticism share this same vision, but with a significative difference:

And it cannot be denied that the Baroque, that contrasting prelude to classicism, offers a more concrete, more authoritative, and more permanent version of this correction. Whereas Romanticism inspired by its belief in the infinite, intensified the perfected creation of form and idea in critical terms, at one stroke the profound vision of allegory transforms things and works into stirring writing.

---


3 On the relationship between Benjamin and romanticism, see Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew E. Benjamin. Walter Benjamin and Romanticism. New York: Continuum, 2002. In this collection of essay by notable scholars the relationship between Benjamin’s idea of criticism in Romanticism and his essay on Baroque is almost entirely neglected.
In other words, to Benjamin, Baroque represents a stronger adjustment to the making of art because, differently than Romanticism, the art and writing of the 17th century do not possess a critical vision of themselves. The Baroque is thus considered as lacking the self-awareness of being a vision of the world and its subject.\(^4\) This is where my analysis departs from Benjamin’s intuition and takes its own path.

Whereas it is true that the Baroque does not explicitly formulate a modern idea of criticism, and that its vision of the void left by the crisis of the allegory generate forms of writing that may appear to us as stirring (erregende), the Baroque treatises on art develop a figurative language which describes a more subtle relationship between work of art and subjectivity. Art begins to be discussed beyond the traditional normative and stylistic terms and it is increasingly seen as a gateway to the understanding of the subject’s creative abilities. The work of art becomes a place where the “I” of the artist and that of the reader/observer meet: the goal of the aesthetic appreciation becomes understanding the ingenuity that lies behind the production of art. Differently than Benjamin, I read Baroque and Romanticism in terms of a continuum based on the development of similar rhetorical patterns grounded in the interplay of words and images. Through the construction of hybrid rhetorical patterns the work of art represents within itself the subject’s creative process, thus building an implicit image of an ideal reader which must undergo a process of aesthetic

\(^4\) Benjamin’s argument is of course deeply rooted in the Romantic notion of self-consciousness as developed by Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, whose shadows are clearly noticeable behind his writing.
education to be able to both read the work and to see in it the mirror of his own imagination. Reading Baroque and Romanticism in terms of continuity means to partially revise the idea, strongly supported by Benjamin, Lacoue-Labarthe, and partially Croce among others, that the Romantics have “no predecessors” on one hand, and that aesthetics, as we intend it today, is a Romantic invention on the other. Contending this traditional view has two major scholarly implications. First, tracing back the origin of the modern aesthetics to the Baroque does not mean to deny the originality of Romanticism, rather it is a way to draw attention to at least two aspects that so far theorists of the Baroque have ignored, namely, the relationship between art and subjectivity that the literature of the 17th century develops on one hand, and the meta-critical significance of the images used by writers, painters, and philosophers to exemplify their own theories. From this perspective the Baroque is not simply a complex historical and literary phenomenon characterized by an unruled “stirring writing” (as a corrective to the making of art after classicism, as Benjamin would say), but the beginning of a critical definition of art as a space of the production and definition of modern subjectivity.

Second, reading Romanticism as a development of aesthetic issues grounded in the Baroque theory of allegory and conceit implies a redefinition of the role of rhetoric in Romantic writing. The analysis of allegorical structures in Romanticism allows us to consider the definition of sublime and criticism not only as a seminal shift in the history of ideas, but also as development of a hybrid structure of significations based on the interplay of words and images. From this
perspective, the originality of Romanticism is to be found in the level of sophistication that the meta-criticism of the work of art accomplishes. To use an almost Hegelian language, Romanticism is the moment of resolution of the dialectic between allegorical authority and ingenuous creativity. Romanticism is thus here Romantically intended: as part of a history of the subject’s poetic self-awareness of being the middle point between opposing languages and of being at the same time the creator and the product of these languages.

This dissertation is organized into three chapters. In the first chapter, I analyze the structure of the Baroque allegory in paintings, poetry, and in treatises on art. I focus on the emergence of a new sensibility toward the role played by the subject in the appreciation of the work of art. I argue that the theory of conceit, especially in the form of imprese and family crests, is a direct response to the crisis of the classical institution of allegory. This analysis allows for a new approach to the literature of the so called imprese and family crests intended as first step of a modern theory of the poetic subject, that is, a subject able to poetically read and understand the philosophical and artistic discourse.

In the second chapter I propose a reading of Giambattista Vico’s New Science as a journey of aesthetic education of the subject from the Baroque conceit to a pre-romantic idea of the sublime. Through a dense web of self-reflexive images Vico turns the Baroque conceit into an epistemological tool. Vico builds a textual structure that requires the reader to poetically connect the different images of the text in one unifying image. The sublime is the effect of an ingenuous imagination: an imagination able to read in between the visual and
the verbal. The work of ingenuity is thus the way the subject accesses the sublime experience of the metaphysical truth. The poetic ingenuity of the subject is considered by Vico as the premise for the understanding of his text that he ultimately defines as a sublime experience. Through this reading I try to conciliate two opposite interpretations of Vico, considered either as a continuation of the 17th century or as a precursor of the Romantics. I argue instead that Vico’s works represent the transition from Baroque to Romanticism and that the sublime experience is made possible only by an epistemological interpretation of the theory of conceit. This reading of the New Science, as a development from Baroque to Romanticism, opens up a new perspective especially on the second edition of the text, published in 1730, which is often glossed over by scholarship in favor of a reading focused mainly on the 1744 edition. I believe instead that the metaphorical language of the 1730 edition should receive a deeper analysis because it marks the threshold of Vico’s transformation of the conceit into a sublime experience. From the 1725 to the 1744 edition, Vico builds a model of an ideal reader within the borders of his text that designs a new experience of the literary text, no longer interpreted in light of hermeneutic principles but intended as an active aesthetic experience.

In the third chapter I argue that the Romantic sublime is the evolution of the problematic relationship between conceit and allegory. My analysis is focused on Novalis’ novel Heinrich Von Ofterdingen that I regard as the attempt of turning the sublime into a textual experience. In my view, Novalis’ text is the ideal prosecution of an aesthetic problem that is rooted in the controversy
between poetic ingenuity and allegorical authority as formulated in the 17th century. The novel is the narrative resolution of this conflict and it describes the ideal journey that the reader must undertake from allegory to conceit in order to unfold his full poetic nature. This reading differentiates itself from a consolidated scholarship that considers the Romantic allegory in the broader context of irony. This is due to the fact that while irony is extensively discussed by the Romantics, allegory finds only sporadic definitions. Yet, a reading based on the structures of allegory and conceit reveals itself to be in some cases more flexible than a philosophical interpretation of the text, since it allows us to read the different languages and levels of the text in terms of rhetorical transformation not necessarily related to the representation of a specific philosophical idea on one hand, and as model for a modern reader intended as an active agent in the production/appreciation of the work of art beyond hermeneutical principles on the other.

In synthesis, this dissertation traces the development of a new rhetoric of subjectivity from Baroque allegory to Romantic sublime. The approach is not philosophical but precisely rhetorical. My analysis is focused on figures of speech, narrative structures, and visual representations. The goal is not to create an authoritative interpretation of three centuries of cultural history, but rather to present indicative cases of works that blend the critical borders of categories such as allegory and the sublime that have so far not been considered to be contiguous to each other.
I decided to focus on the development of certain rhetorical patterns characterized by the conflict between free poetic ingenuity and allegorical authority. The rhetorical patterns I analyze are all based on the interplay of words and images, either in the form of conceit (Tesauro), or book frontispieces (Tesauro and Vico), or verbal representation of visual objects (Novalis). It is in the very nature of this dissertation to build a net of relations as ingenuous as possible to open spaces that would still need to be explored and it is the testimony of my surrendering to the “temptation” of reading Baroque and Romanticism together. This work is comparative in its true essence: it brings together what apparently is unrelated through a process of translation of images. Each chapter contains its own theoretical premises and a discussion of the state of scholarship on that specific topic. I want to keep this introduction short for mainly one reason: being strongly rooted in the rhetorical analysis of texts and images, I fear that an over exemplification of my argument would confuse the reader rather then help him.

To use Vico’s expression, this introduction was meant to give a general “idea of the work,” which should help the reader to get a sense of what will follow and a schematic summary to go back to at the end of the reading. If it is true that a comparative reading of the two is to surrender to a temptation, the accomplishment of this work will depend on how much the reader wants to pursue the same temptation. This dissertation intends to be a medium between the reader and the works I have read; a point of intersection between scholarly interest and a personal curiosity for the intriguing path that joins Baroque and Romanticism, partially unraveled by my work.
1. THE BAROQUE SUBJECT BETWEEN ALLEGORY AND CONCEIT

Taste, ingenuity, imagination, sentiment and similar categories were not concepts fully understood, but new words stemming from vague impressions: problems, not concepts; presentiments of new territories to be conquered, not yet an accomplished conquest. It is enough to be said that those who use those words, as soon as they tried to define more accurately their thoughts about them, they would immediately fall back into old traditional ideas which were the only ones that they clearly mastered. To them these new words were shadows and not body, and when they tried to embrace them they would find they arms wrapped empty around their chests.

B. Croce

A more developed art has learned to surrender itself to the mere appearance.

H. Wollfflin

In The Order of Things, Foucault begins his genealogy of the western idea of logos with the analysis of the seminal turn in the idea of language and representation that occurs in the 17th century:

in the sixteenth century, one asked oneself how it was possible to know that a sign did in fact designate what it signified; from the seventeenth century, one began to ask how a sign could be linked to what it signified. A question to which the Classical period was to reply by the analysis of representation; and to which modern thought was to reply by the analysis of meaning and signification. But given the fact itself, language was never to be anything more than a particular case of representation (for the Classics) or of signification (for us). The profound kinship of language with the world was thus dissolved. [...] Once the existence of language has been eliminated, all that remains is its function in representation: its nature and its virtues as discourse. For discourse is merely representation itself represented by verbal signs.⁵

To Foucault, between the 16th and the 17th centuries language starts to be recognized as a system of signs not related to an intrinsic meaning or a specific object of reference. The culture of Baroque represents the moment in the history

of aesthetics where for the first time the problem of representation arises and with it the question of a new poetic subjectivity. If language has no absolute meaning in itself, its meaning and function will depend on the different shapes and forms it assumes in individual works of art. The language will fail or succeed to signify according to the function it has in the general economy of the artistic representation. Furthermore, by lacking a definite meaning and a clear reference, the language of art requires a metamorphosis in the way the subject relates to the artistic representation. The new Baroque subject is a self able to creatively adjust itself to the transitory nature of the image and of its meaning, to ingenuously interact with the work, and to find aesthetic accomplishment in in the complex albeit unsteady nature of the linguistic sign. Artists and writers of the 17th century design works of art that clearly show their arbitrary connection with the world they proposed to represent. The Baroque art inscribes in itself the image of its own making, the story of its creation.

In this chapter I argue that Baroque aesthetics stems from the crisis of the classical institution of the allegory and that it is in light of the transformation of the idea of allegory that the new forms of artistic representation must be understood. I argue that in this process the theory of the conceit represents the first significative and coherent theoretical formulation of a self-reflexive art, which exposes its nature of artificial construction. The changes in the idea of allegory and the creation of self-reflexive forms of art imply the transformation of the “I” that produces and appreciates the work of art. The new subject is an “I” able to creatively read the ingenuous shapes of the work of art as a place where
the signs lose a univocal reference opening to an almost endless chain of semantic associations.

This chapter is organized in six sections and it describes an ideal trajectory that goes from the crisis of the institution of the allegory to the theory of conceit. The goal is to present how the theory of conceit, as exemplified in Tesauro’s Aristotelian Telescope, is both a response to the crisis of allegory and an attempt to build a new theory of the poetic “I.” In the first section I analyze some of the major treatises on art written by Counter-Reformist theorists in the 17th century. I argue that the Counter-Reformist treatises on art are underscored by a concern for the danger implied in the emerging of a new subjectivity as a creative agent in the development of the work of art.

In the second section I discuss Benjamin’s interpretation of the Baroque allegory as the turning point in the modern understanding of the Baroque. I illustrate how Benjamin outlines the features of a Baroque subjectivity that finds expression in an art that progressively assumes the form of a fragment and of an incomplete allegory. The specificity of the fragmentary forms through which the baroque subjectivity emerges is the object of my analysis in the third, fourth, and fifth section of this chapter.

In the third section I analyze Artemisia Gentileschi’s Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting. I focus on how Gentileschi creates an interplay of different levels of signification requiring the subject/viewer to redefine his own position within the frame of the work of art. I argue that Gentileschi breaks the iconology of the allegory of painting in fragments that compel the observer to creatively
reorganize the different parts of the image, thus gaining an active role in the process of signification of the work.

In the fourth and fifth sections I deepen the analysis of the relationship between Baroque allegory and subjectivity by analyzing the particular case of the representation of Mary Magdalene in Caravaggio and in a few Baroque poets. The figure of the Magdalene is a privileged angle from which to observe the shaping of the new idea of art as a fragmentary work. Magdalene is a transitory figure suspended between a human and divine figuration. The middle position of Magdalene reflects the rhetorical ambiguity of the Baroque art that uses symbols from the allegorical tradition to create more subtle semantic nuances that redefines the subject role in the work of art. I argue that Mary’s state of suspension of is the one of the reader who needs to poetically interpret the work and to creatively connect the different levels of the discourse that the work presents in a fragmentary way.

In the sixth and final section of the chapter I analyze the theory of conceit as exemplified in Emanuele Tesauro’s Aristotelian Telescope (Cannocchiale Aristotelico). I argue that the theory of conceit is a response to the crisis of the institution of the allegory and an attempt to resolve the fragmentary nature of Baroque art. I analyze how the construction of conceits, especially in the forms of imprese, becomes a way to conciliate the different levels of signification of the work of art on one hand, and a way for the subject to gain an insight into his creative power on the other. The hybrid nature of the conceit, which blends words and images, pushes the subject to not only decipher the work before his
eyes, but to identify with the mind that produced the conceit: in deciphering the riddle of the conceit the subject becomes at the same time its creator. I argue that, through this ideal communication between minds beyond the words and images that compound the conceit, a new subject is born: an “I” that discovers how the meaning of a poetic creation is the power itself of creating, the ability of developing from reader/observer to an active agent and producer of forms.

1.1 The Counter-Reformist Reaction to the Baroque
The art of the Baroque was to the Counter-Reformist theorists and critics of the 17th century an onerous challenge. The problem they faced was the exponential proliferation of individual artistic styles and the consequent artists’ increasing self-awareness of their unique creative power. To the Counter-Reformist theorists of art (for the major part Jesuits, as we shall see) this represented a danger to the authority and power of the Sacred Art. The Counter-Reformists’ concern is of pedagogical nature and thus implies a debate on the rhetorical function of art.

In this section, through the analysis of some major texts concerning the problem of the sacred images, I read the criticism of Baroque formulated by authors such as Bartoli, Comanini, and Paleotti as a response to the crisis of the institution of allegory and as an attempt to redefine the role of art in classical terms. To the Counter-Reformist theorists, art is possible only through a recognizable system of codified images aimed at the representation of values capable of inspiring in the subject a sense of devotion and of respect for the authority of the Sacred. Art has thus the function of directing the consciousness
of the reader/spectator toward a predetermined design that is routed not in the individual consciousness of the artist but in the authority of pre-codified images.

However, the situation that the Counter-Reformist theorists had to come to terms was dramatically different. José Antonio Maravall, in The Culture of the Baroque, describes the experience of the Baroque art in the following terms:

Baroque authors could allow themselves to be carried away by exuberance or could hold to a severe simplicity. Either served their ends equally. To appear baroque, the use of one or the other required the fulfillment of no more than one condition: that in both cases abundance or simplicity takes place in the extreme. In the extreme: this was one means of psychological action on people, one that was closely bound to the assumptions and goals of the baroque. It was not a question of exuberance or simplicity in itself, but in either case by virtue of its extremeness, its exaggeration. [...] Ultimately, it is a culture of exaggeration and, as such, a violent culture, not because it proposed violence and was dedicated to demonstrating it (although there was also much of this) but because the presentation of the world offered to us by the baroque artist strives to make us feel amazed, moved, by the instances of violent tension that occur and that it holds [...]. This explains the role of antitheses and means of a similar structure in baroque rhetoric, with its thousand plays of extreme opposition.6

According to Maravall the Baroque art revolves around the representation of extremes intended as opposite polarities but also as extreme experiences from the point of view of the emotional intensification. The excessive nature of the representation and of the emotional drive of the Baroque art make impossible for the observer, the reader, the critic of the Baroque to find a structuring center of the work, of an ideal gravitational point toward which the meaning and the form of the work converge with absolute clarity and harmony. Through a representation of polarities, of extremes, of opposites, the subject of the Baroque is exposed to a stirring reality in constant movement and metamorphosis.

From a rhetorical perspective, the emergence of the antithesis as central figure of speech entails a switch in the perception of the forms of art and of the world. The antithesis becomes a hermeneutic angle from which observing the real. It is in this context that the allegory as a dominant figure of speech loses its privileged status. The allegorical interpretation of the real had been for centuries the bastion of a rhetoric that granted a unifying and always univocally interpretable vision of the universe. Art theorists of the 17th century felt the urgency of fighting the emergence of these extreme representations, and struggled to bring art back to an order, to an allegorically recognizable way of signification. This objective could be achieved only by reinstating the analogical relationship between sign and meaning, and by reaffirming the absolute value of allegory as an interpretative figure.

The Counter-Reformist theorists placed at the center of their discussion of art the problem of the representation of sacred images, on both a rhetorical and an epistemological level: to be called into question are both the value of the truth of the art and its efficacy as a persuasive instrument. Authors like Paleotti, Comanini, and Bartoli, argue against the dangers coming from the artists’ new awareness of an individual style, and the proliferation of new techniques of representation. The danger in the destitution of allegory in favor of representations based on antithesis is an augmented freedom of response allowed to the subject who, in the lack of a recognizable normative meaning, becomes an active part in the production and reception of the work of art. As Karen Pinkus writes, between the 16th and 17th centuries:
on one hand the symbol begins to emerge as (mere) figure or trope, a
definition that will come to be dominant by the romantic period and that
is strictly linked to an aesthetic conception of literary texts. On the other
hand, the term remains charged with the connotation of materiality as
opposed to spirituality and thus of any action that is ‘given to be seen.’

A symbol not bound to a predetermined meaning becomes thus a danger: it is
“out there” to be perceived in the plurality of its possible significations and of its
multiple forms. The sign as an unbound object, as a free signifier, implies an
unbound subject as well. The threat of such a subject underscores the Counter-
reformist treatises on art that pursue a discipline of the sign under the mark of
allegory. The Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images (Discorso intorno alle
immagini sacre e profane) by bishop Gabrielle Paleotti, published in 1582, opens
with a clear j’accuse against the abuse of images and new artistic techniques:

Among the best measures taken by the Council of Trent to restore the
Christian discipline in its dignity and truth, there is one on which the
members of the council insisted greatly: the sacred images. In regards of
these latter today we see in act two serious stratagems (gravi astuzie): one
from the Devil and one from the Man, despite the former is worse than the
latter. The fist stratagem is that enacted by the heretics and iconoclasts
who negate the importance of venerating images. The second stratagem is
the one of Catholics who, despite venerating and producing images, they
have corrupted and sullied their integrity.

Paleotti wants to create a reformatory text, capable of correcting mistakes and
preventing dangerous stratagems. His goal is to “reform the Catholics and fight
the heretics” (Paleotti, 14). Thus the problem of the form, of the presentation of

---

7 Karen Pinkus, Picturing Silence: Emblem, Language, Counter-Reformation
pp. 39

8 Gabriele Paleotti Discorso Intorno Alle Immagini Sacre E Profane (1582).
Città del Vaticano: Libreria editrice vaticana: Cad Wellness, 2002. p. 3 Translation
mine.
images, becomes a field for the claim of both the metaphysical and the practical value of images. Faithful to the Aristotelian idea of art as mimesis, Paleotti maintains that the goal of art is to produce “likeness” and build analogies to “bring closer to the eyes what is far away” (Paleotti, 21). As a Jesuit, Paleotti stresses the communicative value of the work of art not just as an instrument of knowledge (like in Aristotle), but also as an instrument of faith and thus of religious reformation. Yet, what distinguishes Paleotti’s treatises from other texts of the same kind is his intention to design a spiritual path that may lead a subject “from likeness to the glory of heaven” (Paleotti, 67). It is in the reformed faith of the subject that the mistakes of unruly forms may find a solution. Paleotti insists on the necessity of a doctrine behind the images, and thus of the authority of a codified text to bestow upon the image a clear and uncontroversial meaning.

This is a key point because while Paleotti, in genealogical terms, recognizes that images precede writing (Paleotti, 53), at the same time, in terms of the making of art, he clearly states the necessity of a textual knowledge prior to any technē: “as a general rule the following should be enough: if a subject is apt to be represented in writing, it may also become the subject of a painter’s image” (Paleotti, 107). The reason of this predominance of the text over the image stems from the belief that only through the knowledge of a pre-established code the artists can be “tamed” (addomesticare) (Paleotti, 102). Paleotti intends the production of images as instrumental to a spiritual journey led by subjects capable of not errare, of not wandering about aimlessly. For this reason, an artist
must be fully aware not only of the meaning of his object but also of its symbols in order to produce a representation “without imperfections” (Paleotti, 182).

Paleotti’s discourse displays a concern with the proliferation of what he defines as the abuses of art: transgressing the symbolical codes established by the authority of codified texts. The Treatise on Sacred and Profane Images postulates the return to a textual praxis and to the authority of writing as a solution to the dispersion of the subject in the continuity of forms. The major threat that comes from the obscurity of a work of art devoid of a recognizable meaning and thus obscure. According to Paleotti, a work of art must be “as clear as possible” (Paleotti, 266):

One of the best praise a writer or a scholar can receive, regardless of his discipline, is to be able to make clear and comprehensible to everybody concepts otherwise difficult with a proper exposition (esposizione). Likewise, in general, the same thing cab said of a painter since his works are like a book to those who cannot read and to whom it is indispensable to talk openly and clearly. (Paleotti, 202)

A clear exposition is thus the main virtue of an artist and it can be achieved only through abiding by clear principles. Writing and painting, in Paleotti’s language, are experienced through a reading. There are two important implications in this aesthetic assimilation of the two activities: first, painting seems to take on a rhetorical character and, second, the deployment of a verbal/figurative rhetoric must always have as a target the communication of a message and thus it must stem from a precise and meaningful idea. The problem of obscurity and clarity is crucial in the aesthetic reflection of the 17th century, and underscores most of the treatises on the nature of writing and painting.
The Lateran Gregorio Comanini, in the dialogue Il Figino published in 1591, for example, pushes the topic a step further by discussing more explicitly the need for paintings and writings to follow a certain allegorical pattern in order to preserve their clarity. Comanini frames the arts within a tripartition derived from Aristotle’s Poetics. Arts are distinguished in “operative, instrumental, and imitative.” The operative arts are those that use objects and techniques produced by other arts; the instrumental arts are those that produce the objects used by the operative art; the imitative art are those that produce the images (which Comanini defines as idols and simulacra) of the two previous arts. For example, fencing is an operative art because it is based on the deployment of an object, the sword. Blacksmithing is an instrumental art because it produces the object used by fencers. According to Comanini then, all the fine arts are imitative because they do not create the objects of their own representations, but take inspiration from the operative and instrumental arts.

What is relevant in Comanini’s tripartition is that while the operative and instrumental arts are legitimized by each other, the imitative arts require more abstract and difficult criteria of analysis. A fencer can be viewed as good according to his successes. A sword can be determined to be good whether it is well built, sturdy and resistant. Yet, what determines whether an artistic representation is valuable or not? The Aristotelian Comanini finds of course the answer in the classic idea of likeness and of aptness (convenevolezza), but at the same time the author is aware that such categories do not always strictly apply to

sacred images, which often have as their object supernatural or extraordinary events. An example is provided by the problem of the representation of angels. Comanini questions whether the representation of angels as winged creatures is legitimate or whether is, instead, an excess of fantasy and thus a mistake (errore). We read:

It is true that to paint angels with wings is fantastic, since nowhere in the Scriptures we read that angels really have wings. However, those who represent angels with wings, whether painters or writers, are not making any mistake because if it is true that no one may claim to have seen an angel with wings, at the same time the meaning of this wings is true, since angels are the agile and swift executors of God’s will. (Comanini, 275)

The doctrine about the angels is the source of their aesthetic value in a work of art. The mistake is avoided by a clear reference to an authoritative text. This process is an allegorization of the work of art, since the meaning of a work is preserved by the annihilation of the particular in the name of a universal and pre-established truth. Resorting to the allegory is an attempt of normalizing and to bring back to order the proliferation of individual styles. The creation of unruled forms is seen as a threat. The allegory has a stabilizing function and is assimilated by Comanini to a sun that clears the sky from the darkness of the night:

Often we read some stories which considered only at a literal level are incredible and far from having any appearance of truth. But if we make use of an allegorical reading we will see how all those elements that seemed unlikely and improper will vanish in the same way that ghosts and darkness fade away at the first lights of the dawn. […] I am convinced that allegory has the power of ruling out from a text, as well as of a painting, all those components which at first sight would look absolutely not plausible and mysterious. (Comanini, 351-352)

---

10 Translation mine.
Allegory becomes an instrument to redeem the unclear nature of the work of art. However, it is important to understand that to theorists like Comanini and Paleotti, allegory should precede the work of art; it should be at the core of its creation. The artist, in other words, must be educated to control the chiaroscuro of his work in such a way that pleasure and knowledge can coexist without the former prevailing on the latter. Allegory requires a specific knowledge of signs: the artist’s task is to ease the way for such knowledge to those who still do not have it and who could be left erring aimlessly in the continuity of forms of a work of art. Instead of a recognizable text and figure, the subject is faced with forms that appear obscure for the lack of an explicit reference.

The Jesuit Daniello Bartoli, in his seminal work On the Defense and Emend of the Literate Man (Dell’uomo di lettere difeso et emendato, published in 1645) expands the problem of the obscurity and of the subject’s understanding; by calling into question the very essence of the subject’s ingenuity. Bartoli retains that writing and painting may not be a source of pleasure if the subject is not able to recognize what they are about. Bartoli is concerned with where the feeling of marvel may lead the subject in the appreciation of the work of art. Like Paleotti and Comanini, Bartoli seeks a language capable of bringing back to an analogical order the flourishing of individual forms. Bartoli assimilates human ingenuity to the Divine creation:

This is what happens to who is filled with wonder in contemplating the wonderful face of nature, the Sky, where God designed things of unmatchable beauty by copying them from Himself with sensible matter: who contemplates the sky will then find in it such enjoyment for which his ingenuity will be absorbed, the thoughts ecstatic, and the mind blessed (che ne resti assorto l’ingegno, estatici i pensieri, e beata la mente).
Everybody admires the sky but not everybody understands it. There is the same difference that exists between two people who observe some Arabic calligraphy in blue and gold and one only see the beautiful work of the characters (il lavorio de ben composti caratteri) while the other understands what the characters (l’altro di piú ne legge i periodi) so that the pleasure of the eyes is not the biggest.11

Bartoli somehow builds a Baroque image in which the visual and the verbal are combined. The contemplation of the sky is assimilated to the contemplation of an artistically drawn character. A subject can either be enraptured by their sophisticated shape or be able to read beyond the shape and thus overcome the simple pleasure of the eyes. Again, reading is an image for understanding. In a world intended as a “theater of marvels” (Bartoli, 65) the subject must learn to move from ingenuity, to ecstatic thoughts, to a state of beatitude of the mind. The climax is an aesthetic journey from the ingenuity of elaborated forms to a mind capable of reading the meaning of the forms behind their sophisticated shape. So to speak, the ingenuity must find and/or always be set in motion by a text capable of turning pleasure into understanding.

To Bartoli, errare is part of the very experience of truth and of the human being on earth. Ingenuity is the meeting point of wander and wonder, of marvel and roaming: “the Truth of the Sky is a pilgrim on the earth and can be found only through a pilgrimage. Who seeks for the Truth is like a river very small at its spring, and that by flowing increasingly grows until it becomes almost a sea” (Bartoli, 32). In wandering, the subject nourishes his ingenuity and thus the

---

ability of producing and experiencing wonder. The problem of obscurity, to which Bartoli dedicates the entire conclusive chapter of his book, is framed within the theoretical issue of the growth of individual ingenuity.

To Bartoli, the major cause of obscurity is the ambition and vanity of a subject who wants to be admired and who works outside any authority or sense of order and discipline (Bartoli, 266). Bartoli tries to discipline the discourse by resorting to analogies in order to clarify the problem of obscurity. Bartoli assimilates the unruled ingenuity to Proteus, the Gordian knot, and to Icarus (Bartoli, 263-267), three figures that convey the sense of something in disguise and thus beguiling (Proteus), a “fake” problem that can be solved with a resolute cut (Gordian Knot), and the daring beyond limits which culminates in death (Icarus). The ingenuity develops, so to speak, out of proportion in the lack of an authoritative text able to normalize the diversity of forms. The major danger comes from “the appearing and disappearing and the jumping from West to East” (Bartoli, 293), that is the uncertainty of what the figure shows and the unstable nature of its reference.

As René Wellek suggests, the Baroque should be considered from both a stylistic and ideological perspective. The ideology of the Baroque is one thing with its style, with its way of showing itself. Ideology must be intended etymologically as eidos and logos, vision and word. What the text shows is not

12 “It is probably necessary to abandon attempts to define baroque in purely stylistic terms. Once must acknowledge that all stylistic devices may occur at almost all times [...]. The most promising way of arriving at a more closely fitting description of the baroque is to aim at analysis which would correlate stylistic and ideological criteria.” René Wellek. Concepts of Criticism. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963. pp. 102-108
always a clear image, and the image is not always a clear text to read. The Baroque chiaroscuro becomes more than a technique: it emerges as an epistemological perspective on the real. The Baroque style must be looked at as an ideology insofar as it is intended as an attempt to build a discourse on the truth and its representability. The Counter-Reformist treatises and the works of art embody two tendencies of the 17th century aesthetics: one toward the exploration of unseen forms and one toward a unifying principle. The two tendencies embody two visions of the universe. The Baroque ideology as a vision of the world has a strong aesthetic character and it implies an idea of the universe as poetic construction. Baroque artists and Counter-Reformist theorists both look at the linguistic signs as a way to decipher the rhetoric of nature and they thus read it like a book, as a narrative to unfold.

In this regard, it might be helpful to remark on how the models of the universe built by Copernicus and Kepler reflect the Baroque clash between the quest for new and unseen forms and the necessity of a unifying vision. As Fernand Hallyn writes, “the Copernican revolution accomplished a kind of anamorphosis of the universe since it required man to abandon his customary point of view in favor of one that is uncustomary but appropriate to viewing God’s work.”13 In a sense, by switching positions between the earth and the sun, the subject gets closer to see things as God does, and thus a step closer to understand the secret of creation. Yet, the Copernican revolution occurs still

within the confines of an idea of closed space.\textsuperscript{14} It is with Kepler that the universe becomes infinite and de-centered: “the history of the discovery of the elliptical orbits cannot be explained in terms of the two foci. It is the history of a circle that is deformed, of a center that is de-centered. Kepler stands out by his refusal to dissociate thinking about form and thinking about force” (Hallyn, 209). The Baroque stands between these two models. On one hand, the Baroque subject discovers his role in the process of creation and thus becomes a creative force, and yet this same discovery is also the perception of a loss of center and of a dynamic force constantly swinging between two opposite polarities. A center would allow the subject to reestablish an order based on analogies and correspondences, while an elliptical orbit is based on a force stretched between two foci that by attracting and repulsing each other resemble a rhetorical oxymoron: two opposites which are forced nevertheless to coexist (Hallyn, 211). The crisis of the institution of allegory reflects the passage from a universe with a defined center to one built around opposites forces. This shift entails a metamorphosis in both the idea of art and subjectivity. In the following section, through the analysis of Benjamin's interpretation of the Baroque, I illustrate how the work of art progressively assumes the character of a fragment and the subject that of an interpreter of ever changing forms constantly redefining the meaning of words and images.

\textsuperscript{14} On this subject see: Alexandre Koyré, \textit{From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe}. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968.
1.2 Benjamin and the Baroque Fragment

As I suggested, the Baroque subject is both a wanderer and a wonderer: it is a microcosm that synthesizes both the feelings of amazement and displacement. The wander seeks for a lost unity and finds himself wondering in front of the multiplicity of forms and shapes of the real. In rhetorical terms, the crisis of the allegory translates this twofold movement. To the Counter-Reformist theorists the control of the sources of signification of the work of art was crucial to determine the success of its devotional intention. To Paleotti, Bartoli, Comanini, the origin of art is to be found not in the individual inspiration or style, but in the pre-codified allegorical images as they are presented in canonical sacred texts. The Counter-Reformists, by controlling the origin of the work of art, aim at avoiding any free wandering of the subject and any free interaction with the work itself. The work of art must be a vessel of a message. Angus Fletcher in this regards write:

Allegory does not accept doubt; its enigmas show instead an obsessive battling with doubt. It does not accept the world of experience and the senses; it thrives on their overthrow, replacing them with ideas. In these ways allegory departs from mimesis and myth and its intention in either case seems to be a matter of clearly rationalized ‘allegorical levels of meaning.’ These levels are the double aim of the aesthetic surface; they are its intention, and its ritualized form is intended to elicit from the reader some sort of exegetical response.\(^{15}\)

From the point of view of the Counter-reformist theorists, the interpretation the image must elicit from the reader or viewer is an exact exegesis of the work without any reasonable doubt. Yet, what the Baroque art introduces within the

system of the allegory is precisely “the world of experiences and of senses,” with the result of making the origin of the work of art dwells somewhere outside a precodified system of images and meanings.

Walter Benjamin's  The Origin of the German Tragic Drama tackles the problem of the new nature of the Baroque allegory. In this section I argue that Benjamin’s interpretation of the Baroque allegory is the basis for a theory of art as fragment, intended as a grey zone between a visible sign and an invisible allegorical meaning. As fragment, art does not have a recognizable origin capable of bestowing on the work a complete and recognizable allegorical meaning. Benjamin interprets the allegory as a tension, as a form that stretches between two different temporalities and spaces: the here and now of the subject and the there and then of the work of art. The tension of the Baroque allegory is determined by the struggle to bridge the gap between the two and as such I believe it must be understood as a fragment of a totality that ceases to exist on one hand, and one that still needs to be accomplished on the other. Benjamin’s reading of the Baroque is instrumental to understand the particular relationship between words, images, and subjectivity in the art and writing of the 17th century.

The Origin of the German Tragic Drama is a landmark in the theory of Baroque allegory. To define the Baroque work of art as a fragment, the first notion that needs to be contended is that of the origin. Benjamin argues that what we usually call origin has a complete different meaning:

Origin (Ursprung), although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis (Entstehung). The term origin is
not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete.\textsuperscript{16}

The distinction between genesis and origin is of crucial importance. To Benjamin, genesis means the exact moment in time and space when a work of art come into existence. Origin means the process of becoming of the work of art in time. Establishing the genesis implies understanding the reason why a work of art came into being. Origin is instead a more blurry idea that implies the vision of the work of art in the “process of becoming and disappearance.” To Benjamin, starting with the 17th century, the subject is progressively unable to determine the exact genesis of a work due to the lack of an authoritative allegorical interpretation. As we have seen, the traditional allegory (the one advocated by the Counter-Reformist) received its authority from a universally recognized truth. The Baroque allegory moves beyond the codified images obscuring thus its genesis. The lack of a fixed genesis determines the impossibility of interpreting the work of art against any doubt, to use Fletcher’s expression.

\textsuperscript{16} According to Benjamin, Entstehung (genesis) comes from the merge of the prefix Ent- (away) and the verb stehen (to stand). Genesis, if we follow this particular etymology, implies a moving of separation, of moving afar from something. Instead Ursprung (origin) stands for is a process of repetition. Ur- and Sprung are in fact a sort of tautology: Ur- stands for original with a function of intensification, and Sprung for origin, source. Benajmin seems to imply that while genesis constitutes a separation, origin is a constant return on itself, of the spring (Sprung) that turns into the very original, the absolute primordial. The movement of origin is a return on itself, that of genesis a parting away.
What happens in the Baroque art is a metamorphosis of the allegory into a problematic tension between the individual sign and its universal meaning. The “becoming and disappearance” of a work of art means a ceaseless movement of veiling and unveiling of the meaning of the work. The Baroque thus presents the subject with forms that constantly call for different point of views, different angles from which observing the emerging of a meaning. The Baroque art requires the subject to not just make an exegesis of the work (literally to “take outside” from ex, out and ago, carry) but to constantly change his own eyes according to different shapes the work takes on. Origin describes this movement of constant approximation to a meaning that never fully reveals itself. Origin implies a certain degree of uncertainty; it is a plunge into a process of transformation and modification. The idea itself of genesis, of the absolute beginning of a work of art, is disguised in the extremes and polar forces of the Baroque art. Genesis becomes a self-deception of the reader/observer; an illusion that is part of the ever becoming and disappearing of the work of art. Benjamin suggests an image of Baroque art as endless origin, as an art that dissimulates itself and disguises its principles and its beginnings. In Benjamin’s view, the Baroque represents the moment in which artists started to represent within the borders of their works the twofold nature of the artistic form that while it gives the illusion of a meaning beyond itself, at the same time it reveals itself as artificial construction renouncing to any reassuring idea of mimesis. The Baroque presents itself as a continuity of forms that flow into each other in a movement that breaks the traditional classification of the fine arts by winding painting,
writing, and architecture: the work becomes a temporal device stretched between a past and a future, between an already seen and a never seen before. The space of the Baroque resembles an overwhelming landscape of possible worlds that challenges the ability of the observer to comprehend it, in its ethnological sense of cum-prendere, of embracing with the eyes. For the instability of the point of view that the Baroque art implies, the aesthetic experience of art becomes a form of apprenticeship:

The characteristic feeling of dizziness which is induced by the spectacle of the spiritual contradictions of this epoch is a recurrent feature in the improvised attempts to capture its meaning. Even the most intimate idioms of the Baroque, even its details, indeed perhaps more than anything else, are antithetical. Only by approaching the subject from some distance and, initially, foregoing any view of the whole can the mind be led through a more or less ascetic apprenticeship, to the position of strength from which it is possible to take in the whole panorama and yet remain in control of oneself. The course of this apprenticeship is what had to be described here. (Benjamin, 56)

The subject must find its way through the Baroque landscape renouncing to any concept of genesis and any vision totality. The representation becomes slippery and shows an architecture of signs that, like a Baroque palace, blends the borders between the necessary and the accidental, the universal and the particular, the structural and the decorative. To Benjamin, the Baroque calls into question the very essence of the world as an object of interpretation and art as an instrument of reification of its meaning:

Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devaluated. This religious dialectic of content has its formal correlative in the dialectic of convention and expression. For allegory is both: convention and expression; and both are inherently contradictory. However, just as baroque teaching conceives of history as created events, allegory in particular, although a convention like every kind of writing, is regarded as created, like Holy Scripture. The allegory of the seventeenth
century is not convention of expression, but expression of convention. At the same time expression of authority, which is secret in accordance with the dignity of its origin, but public in accordance with the extent of its validity. And the very same antinomies take plastic form in the conflict between the cold, facile technique, and the eruptive expression of allegorical interpretation. (Benjamin, 175)

At stake is the definition of the role of the subject in the process of signification. The profane world of signs is redeemed in the vision of the idea, but then again negated by the partial totality of the vision itself, of its being a monad, a stretch between opposite polarities. As long as it is possible to recognize the convention behind language, the subject is still in control of himself and of his cognitive faculties. However, when allegory becomes the instrument for unveiling convention as such, the subject is called to create his own discourse to make sense of the sign, to create ex-novo a new convention, a new representation. The allegory of the 17th century leaves the subject in a desolate desert of signs pointing toward something invisible, causing a fracture between speech and vision. The individual poetic creation and the individual vision of the work of art determine a constant redefinition of the meaning of art. It is from this angle that the Baroque work of art can be regarded as a fragment, as individual piece of a totality only alluded but never revealed. Benjamin uses the terms Bruchstück and Schriftbild (Benjamin, 175).

Symbols in art become fragments (Bruchstück) of a truth that is no longer, but also at the same time pieces of a truth not yet revealed; they point to a totality that always misses a final piece. This particular fragment has the form of a Schriftbild, which literally means a typeface, what in Greek would be a graphé and/or a typos-graphé, the imprinting of a sign. The image of symbol as
typeface, as script (Schrift) and as image (Bild), does not point in this case toward any reconciliation of the visual and the verbal. The Schriftbild is neither a hieroglyph, nor a symbol, nor an allegory: it does not mediate between transcendence and immanence. The Baroque allegory is an incomplete process of signification, and the work thus becomes a fragment, a Schriftbild: the place of an absence and of a misfire. Benjamin writes:

This is what happens in the Baroque. Both externally and stylistically, in the extreme character of the typographical arrangement and in the use of highly charged metaphors, the written tends toward the visual. It is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite of the artistic symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality, than this amorphous fragment (amorphe Bruchstuck) that is seen in the form of allegorical script (Schriftbild). In it the Baroque reveals itself to be the sovereign opposite of classicism, as which hitherto, only romanticism has been acknowledged. (Benjamin, 176)

The tendency toward the visual is not due to the necessity of finding a new representative language, but rather it is the symptom of the detriment of both the Schrift (writing) and Bild (image). Baroque redefines the relationship between words and images, logos and eidos, on the basis of a new perception of the real as amorphous fragment (amorphe Bruchstuck) and allegorical script (Schriftbild). This hiatus between visible and invisible; sign and meaning; form and its content determine the crisis of the allegory.

The theory of the conceit, especially in the form of the impresa as we will see in the last section of this chapter, must be seen as a response to the vision of the universe as an incomplete fragment, as a sign that stands in the materiality of its verbal and visual nature. If, as mentioned above, the Baroque can be seen as both a cosmic and rhetorical ellipsis, as suspension and deferral, the verbal and
the figural may be regarded as the two foci around which the orbit of the Baroque aesthetic runs, by constantly approaching and then rapidly outdistancing the two points of attraction in an endless process of revolution. However, in order to understand the aesthetic value of the conceit as a form of representation of a new relationship between subject and work of art, we need to first analyze the formal solutions used by artists and writers in the 17th century to rework the idea of allegory.

In the following three sections of this chapter I discuss how in writing and painting the deconstruction of the category of allegory causes a redefinition of the role of the observer/reader within the borders of the work of art. The first case is the famous Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting by Artemisia Gentileschi, the second the Portrait of Mary and Martha by Caravaggio, and the third is the representation of Mary Magdalene in Baroque poetry.

1.3 Artemisia Gentileschi and the Allegory of Painting

Baroque art undermines the authority of allegory and it opens a new perspective on the position of subjectivity in relation to the work of art. By transgressing the traditional boundaries, the Baroque designs a new idea of poetic subjectivity and redefines the role of the self in both the production and appreciation of the work of art. The poetic subject of the Baroque is a self able to understand the fluctuant nature of the artistic ingenuity and to adjust his expectations to the shaping of sophisticated forms in the work of art. I argue that this transgression is possible only by placing the subject of the viewer/reader within the confines of the work
of art itself and by exposing the artificial construction of the image. Artemisia Gentileschi’s Self-Portrait (often referred to as Self-Portrait as Allegory of Painting), by explicitly addressing the traditional allegorical representation of painting as such, it provides us with an example of how in the 17th century, from abstract codification, allegory becomes an individual and self-centered form of observation of the world.

The painting enacts a deconstruction of the figure of allegory in relationship to the self and it allows us to illustrate some of the major dynamics of the Baroque aesthetics. It has been noted by scholarship how Gentileschi introduces in her portrait iconographic elements belonging to the traditional figuration of the art of painting that, in the 17th century, found a canonical formulation in Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia. Ripa describes painting as having unruly hair (symbol of the creative furor), a gag on her mouth (symbol of the silent expression through images) and a necklace around the neck a small mask as a pendant (symbol of the art as mimesis). However, Gentileschi introduces significative changes in this pattern with the effect of modifying the perception of the painting calling into question the meaning itself of allegory.

Let’s consider the iconological elements of the painting. The hair is unruly, expressing the creative and passionate nature of a genius, but the mouth is not bound and it is free from any constraint. Symbolically, the female artist is perhaps claiming her identity as a free woman not bound to any stereotype, but more in general she is also pointing toward the freedom of a creative voice.

---

Gentileschi is unleashing a speech, a discourse that does not come along through words, but through images. Mary D. Garrard in Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622 argues that the painter’s works should be looked at not just in biographical terms and as claim of a feminine identity, but as aesthetic definition of the self as an artist. In order to enter Gentileschi’s painting, the viewer needs to give up the textual definition of allegory as a conventional system of signs.

Artemisia Gentileschi, in portraying herself without any covering on her mouth, transgresses the authority of the established allegory as a normative text. Ripa’s description of the allegory of painting is not only part of a repertoire of images, but it is also part of an exegetic model. The image of the allegory is torn apart and broken down in details. To use Benjamin’s expression, the allegory becomes a script made of different fragments. Gentileschi transgresses this text through the presentation on the canvas of her own body as painter. The individual body becomes a place where the imposing authority of the allegorical text is nullified.

The particular treatment of the frame in the painting reveals most of the originality of Gentileschi’s representation. The image looks like a cut of real life since it shows the artist at work in portraying herself. There is no frame for the self-portrait since there is no pre-codified posture assumed by the subject.\(^{19}\) The untethered mouth has opened a free space. The freedom of subjectivity representing itself is displayed in the optical construction of the painting. Gentileschi uses two mirrors to capture her profile. The vision is indirect, structured around a triangle composed of the canvas and two angled mirrors. The angled mirrors are most likely placed on the sides of the canvas, to allow the painter to glimpse at the reflection of a reflection. The creation of the painting is a self-reflexive circuit. The self is scattered in multiple images.

The act of painting, the performance of the artist is the central action. The canvas on which the subject is painting is purposively left blank. The self-

portrait, to be complete, should include on the canvas the image of Artemisia looking at herself painting, and again that representation within the frame of canvas should then, in smaller size, show another Artemisia painting the image of herself painting. Theoretically speaking, the blank canvas could be filled ad libitum with concentric representations framing each other. The work is a composition of fragments looking for their unity; every part of painting is both a framing and a framed image.

To summarize, Gentileschi transgresses the convention of the allegorical frame by breaking the iconological pattern (the unbound mouth), and then she breaks her body into two reflected images. Yet, the canvas where she is working is represented as blank. We can place Ripa’s canonical description of the allegory of painting and the blank canvas at the opposite ends of the same spectrum. The iconology of the allegory, as authoritative logos, is denied by the eidos of the artist. The representation of subjectivity is a text that is no longer allegorical; it is an image not yet visible, like the blank canvas that inscribes in it a never-ending chain of self-portraits; it becomes a rhetorical ellipsis. The subject becomes a textus, a tangle of unspoken lines. The ideology of the painting is suspended between an eidos and logos, an idea and writing. To understand the importance of this formal solution and its epistemological and theoretical implications, Gentileschi’s painting can be compared to other self-portraits of both the Renaissance and the Baroque period:
In both the paintings above we can notice how the artists place themselves in a frontal position, next to an already finished work of art. The work of the artist is objectified in a painting that is represented within the borders of the self-portrait. The identity of the representing self is closed in this frame. The subject and the object are represented simultaneously but are distinguishable. In the case of Anguissola’s self-portrait (1590 on the left), we see the painter posing next to a finished painting; the brush she holds in her hand is part of the pose. In Johannes Gumpp’s painting (1646, on the right), the reflecting mirror is not left outside but included in the representation: the painting and its reflection are contained within one frame. Artemisia Gentileschi clearly breaks this pattern hiding the source of the reflection and by capturing herself in the act of painting. The viewer occupies the position of one of the two angled mirrors and the blank canvas occupies the other. The two angled mirrors are specular and reach outside the
frame of the painting. The body of Artemisia becomes the vehicle of an ellipsis, of a rhetorical suspension. This rhetorical transformation of the subject destabilizes any epistemological certainty and leads the viewer to identify himself with the process of painting, thus becoming part of the work of art, an image within the image. The blank canvas on which Gentileschi paints herself is a white page that unfolds in millions of possible reflections. Gentileschi’s painting reveals a twofold tendency toward the construction and deconstruction of the illusion of art: the viewer is imprisoned between levels of representation that reveal the artificial nature of the image.

In this regard, William Egginton has suggested to consider Baroque as a “problem of thought” since it is based on a “generalized dissociation of the world of senses from an interior world of the knowing subject.”

The dissociation between self and perception, inside and outside of the subject, finds expression according to Egginton into two strategies of representations that are defined by the author as either minor or major:

This strategy, which I call the major strategy of the baroque, assumes the existence of a veil of appearances, and then suggests the possibility of a space opening just beyond those appearances where truth resides. In painting and architecture this strategy corresponds to the well-known baroque techniques of trompe l’oeil, anamorphosis, and what Heinrich Wölflin referred to as the painterly style, in which the borders between bodies are blurred and spaces in the painting are left unclear. […] [The Baroque’s minor strategy], rather than accepting the presupposition of two opposing levels, a representation and a reality independent of that representation, undermines our ability to make this distinction in the first place. Not, however, in order to lead us further astray from ‘reality itself,’ but rather to make us aware, to remind us that we are always, at any level, involved with mediation. (Egginton, 6)

---

This distinction between a major and a minor strategy is somehow only apparent because the two phenomena happen at the same time. The Baroque work of art gives both the illusion of a beyond of the work of art and the delusion due to the perception of the enigmatic nature of the linguistic sign. Gentileschi’s self-portrait enacts both these strategies: it presents an iconological language in the harmony of its forms on one hand, and it denies the validity of that language in the overall composition of the image on the other. The illusion of reality is immediately suspended by the artificial nature of the construction. The subject is placed within the boundaries of the painting and it becomes part of the same mechanism. Gentileschi’s painting shows what the dominant tendency of the culture of the 17th century is: the alteration of the conventional systems of reference of language, and the consequent reinvention of the subject of art from mere consumer of the work of art to an agent figure among the figures.

1.4 Caravaggio and the Illusory Allegory of Mary Magdalene

In my analysis of Artemisia Gentileschi’s Self-Portrait I argued that the transgression of the traditional allegorical iconology is the gateway to a new representation of subjectivity intended as a creative “I” who is no longer a mere consumer of the work of art, but an active agent in the construction of the work of art as a whole. I will now consider a seminal work by Caravaggio, namely the Martha and Mary Magdalene painting, realized around 1598. This painting is crucial to understand the fate of allegory in sacred images in the 17th century and it allows us to further define the position of subjectivity in relation to
Baroque art. In reworking the allegorical structure of signification, the Baroque art introduces a rhetorical principle of indecisiveness that assumes the form of a syllogistic enthymeme. I argue that by reverting the logical structure of signification the image builds a new point of view for the subject who can now observe the making itself of the image as an artistic, temporal, and not an allegorical construction. Let’s look at the image.

The painting is also referred to as The Conversion of Mary Magdalene. Mary, standing on the right, is holding an orange flower in her right hand and rests her left arm on a convex mirror. The position of the mirror seems unsteady: it is either sustained by some prop in the back that we don’t see, or we must believe that Mary is holding it with her left hand between her thumb, middle, and ring finger. On the table in front of Mary there is a comb and a powder container,
symbols of the vanity that Mary foregoes in order to marry Christ in an act of faith (symbolized by the orange flower). The personal effects on the table look deteriorated and thus suggest that Mary has somehow already abandoned her vanity and love for earthly things. However, her hair, her dress, the look of her face, so impenetrable and algid compared to Martha’s passionate look, put her in a middle position. This is why the painting is often looked at as depicting the moment itself of the conversion. The comb and the hair are somehow in a contradictory position: the former lays on the table almost abandoned, already worn out by the time, while the latter, the hair, remains finely and neatly arranged.21 At a rhetorical level, the painting confuses a metonymic and a metaphorical dimension. The semantic contiguity of the comb and hair is disrupted by their metaphorical discontinuity. The warned out comb signifies the renunciation of vanity, and yet the hair still appears as arranged by a tasteful and alluring vanity. From this perspective, the position of the flower, as sign of Mary’s marriage to Christ, is significative.

If we trace a perpendicular line from the hair to the comb, we see that the flower stands exactly in the middle. This middle position has a rhetorical function. The marriage is not yet accomplished and the flower stands between

---

21 Catherine Puglisi writes: “The strength of the image derives largely from the antithesis Caravaggio projected in the two sisters’ personalities. Whereas the Magdalen’s elegant appearance and the cosmetic jar and comb on the table are reminders of her former life of pleasure, Martha’s tempered ways can be inferred from her subdued attire. Her bowed position and shadowed profile set off her regally posed sister, whose form dominates the center of the scene. In his care to recreate real experience, Caravaggio painted a comb lacking a tooth and paid special attention to the reflections in the mirror of the Magdalene’s fingers, her ruffled cuff, and touches of red and green from her clothing.” Catherine R. Puglisi. Caravaggio. London: Phaidon, 1998. pp. 68
what is no longer and what is not yet. Caravaggio’s Magdalene stands on a threshold; it is a temporal figure that in the stillness of her posture embodies the story of a journey. This journey, however, to be exemplary, as the sacred context requires, needs a further level of representation. The symbols must signify an allegory to raise the painting above its temporality and thus make it an object of contemplation. There is a conflict between scene and its representation, between semantic level of the symbols and their allegorical interpretation. Everything revolves around the mirror as a potential carrier of an allegory.

The allegorical reference of the mirror has to be found in the traditional association of Mary, the mother of Jesus, with a “spotless mirror of God.” The image is derived from the deuterocanonical Book of Wisdom attributed by the tradition to King Solomon.22 This description of the wisdom has traditionally been linked to the figure of the Virgin Mary. By a process of personification, wisdom is allegorized in the Virgin Mary and, by metonymic association, in the attribute of the mirror. The mirror embodies Mary and it becomes an immanent figure that contains and reveals a transcendent universal. The allegory consists of this progressive escalation of references. The mirror signifies an entire process of figuration, interpretation, substitution, and abstraction. It embodies a process of conceptualization and an entire interpretative dynamic. The allegory is possible

22 “For wisdom is more moving than any motion: she passeth and goeth through all things by reason of her pureness. For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty: therefore can no defiled thing fall into her. For she is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness.” Book of Wisdom in Eugene W. Bunkowske. The Apocrypha: The Deuterocanonical Books of the Old Testament Ed. W. Bunkowske. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009. (7:26)
only through the reference to a text that decodes the mirror as a symbol of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the mirror is allegorical as long as its original idea is recognizable. No obscurity is allowed in the allegorical process. The allegorical symbol carries within itself the story of its own making, of how it came to signify what it is. The mirror is somehow a synecdoche of the allegory, it is its square root.

If we look at Magdalene as the heroine of a moral allegorical narrative, we can get more or less the following plot: 1) Martha represents the trigger, the beginning of a process of conversion, 2) the mirror at the opposite end symbolizes the ultimate goal of this process, and is the allegorical agent of the image, 3) Magdalene stands in between and embodies opposing forces (a vain figure not yet fully undressed of her earthly belongings). Still within the framework suggested by Fletcher, in such figurative plot the intention of the allegory should be clear: it serves to illustrate a story of redemption. A sacred image can never be just a scene, it must carry in itself a higher meaning, the meaning of an example to follow. Thus, recognizing or not the allegory determines the sacred value of the image, whether the painting depicts a universal example or a particular scene. Determining whether the painting is an allegory and how this allegory works affects our view of the figurative economy of the image and its working. Deciphering the allegory is not a mere matter of discovering a meaning, but rather finding out how the represented scene ascribes to the subject who appreciates the painting a certain role and position within the frame of the work itself. The mirror next to Mary Magdalene creates a redundant
effect: we see a mirror as both an object and a symbol for something else. Is the mirror just a mirror in which the vain Mary Magdalene takes pleasure in admiring her beauty? Is it, on the contrary, the gate to the metamorphosis into the other Mary, the one beyond and behind the mirror, the Virgin, the wisdom? One option does not exclude the other. However, there is something unclear in the position of the mirror. Who is holding it? Where is the mirror facing? What is the mirror reflecting? Why a convex mirror?

The mirror looks like a stand-alone object. It occupies a prominent position filling almost all the right side of the canvas. It is placed on a blurred background. We do not see whether it is leaning on something or if it’s Mary’s hand that is holding it upright. The mirror seems to not fully belong to the setting of the scene. It is a strongly decorative object. It does not serve the same function of the comb and the powder box. A convex mirror has the effect of shrinking the objects reflected in it and distorting them. The comb and the powder could not be used along with this particular mirror. Furthermore, the mirror seems almost framed by the green cloth hanging from Mary’s arm that overhangs on the mirror as a drape or curtain. The spotless mirror reflects pure light or, better, it is the point of irradiation of light. No object, no figure can stand in the way of the mirror. Every object would stain the mirror with its reflection. Yet, in Caravaggio’s painting, the mirror, which should point toward an allegorical agency in the scene, reflects something: a spot of light.

The main source of light in the painting is located in the upper left corner. The spot in the mirror is the reflection of a light pointing in the direction of the
viewer. The curvature of the convex mirror allows expanding the source of light outside the scene. It brings within the frame the position of the subject that stares at the scene. The mirror stands alone, held by an invisible support, and cast a beam of light at the angle occupied by the viewer. The spot makes it impossible to recognize any other figure. The mirror does not reflect anything else. The light bounces back to the viewer who cannot discern anything else.

The mirror is far from being spotless: it reflects a precise source of light that comes from outside the scene. A spotless mirror would be a paradox: to be really spotless a mirror should not be a mirror, it should not reflect anything, it should be clear of any image, being of pure light. Any reflection is a stain, a spot. A stainless mirror requires an act of faith, like the belief in the Immaculate Conception, which not by chance is represented by a spotless mirror. The spotless mirror of the Virgin Mary is the reflection of the working of God, of its energéia: it reflects everything without reflecting anything. By pointing at the viewer, the mirror puts the self in the middle of an epistemological confusion. The stain of light on the mirror negates its clarity. The sign of the allegory is an optical device that entraps the viewer into the scene: the light from which we observe the painting is a macula on the mirror that blinds any vision. The mirror of the allegory becomes then the meta-critical figure of the subject, which stains the painting with its light, with its attempt of illuminating the meaning of the scene. The allegory remains concealed behind the convex surface of the mirror, trapped in its invisible virtual focus. The optical structure reflects the working of this imperfect allegory. The mirror becomes not an allegory of Mary but, so to speak,
a meta-allegory, it reflects the making of the allegory itself. The light cast on the mirror from the subject’s position obscures any other possible reflection, Panofsky remarks how “a tension between the two dimensional space is utilized as a means of subjective intensification. This is a fundamental attitude of Baroque art. A conflict of antagonist forces merging into a subjective unity […]”.

The unclear meaning of the mirror breaks the machine of the allegory and opens it up to the doubt. The shape, the posture, and the reflection of the mirror, cast a doubt on the truth of the allegory exposing it, to use Fletcher’s terminology, to the “external world” and the “senses.” Mary seems to be adjusting the direction of the mirror to reflect a precise spot of light. She seems to cunningly turn that mirror toward the viewer, unnoticed by Martha. The spot of light is so bright as to obscure anything else. The allegory reveals all its complexity, it becomes a tautological affirmation of itself. The viewer recognizes the incomplete allegory, and the space of the transcendent meaning becomes instead the space of the epistemological uncertainty of the self. The allegory becomes an instrument to inscribe the self within the representation. What we see, the symbol, does not equal what it represents. In this regard, Gombrich in Symbolic Images writes:

One thing is clear. We cannot tackle this kind of question at all unless we are ready to abandon the assumptions about the functions of the image we usually take for granted. We are used to make a clear distinction between two of this functions: that of representation and that of symbolization. A painting may represent an object of the visible world, a woman holding a balance, or a lion. It may also symbolize an idea. To those conversant with the conventional meanings attached to these images, the woman with the

---

balance will symbolize justice, the lion courage […]. On reflection we may be prepared to grant the possibility of another kind of symbolism, not conventional but private, through which an image can become the expression of the artist’s conscious or unconscious mind. […] 24

What a symbol represents is not just capable of changing meaning according to certain interpretative perspectives. The symbol and its representation are a vision of the world. The subject does not just simply assume an angle of vision, but the vision of the symbol is an idea of the world. The idea of the work of art and the idea of the world are one. The interpretative process is an aesthetic operation: it is a construction of an idea as eidos. The task of criticism, especially on baroque, is not then to establish the truth of a painting in an ontological sense, rather: “to the modern critic, in other words, the problem of personification and indeed of all symbolism in art is an aesthetic rather than ontological problem. What interests him is what the symbol expresses rather than what it signifies” (Gombrich, 126). Expression is the third dimension between the surface of the work of art and the point of view of the subject, a “twilight region” of language (Gombrich, 125) between the metaphorical and the literal meaning of signs: the space where the imperfect allegory of the spotless mirror takes place.

The symbol opens a breech into what is behind it (like the mirror held by Mary), but then it shadows its own significance. Allegory, which seems to be the clearest way to access the intention and the motif of a work, becomes a hybrid space in which the subject discovers himself as part of the aesthetic expression. The self is captured between two opposites tendencies: one toward a universal allegorical meaning (the mirror of wisdom) and one toward a symbolic meaning.

(the mirror as a real mirror that looks at the viewer).\textsuperscript{25} It is in this sense, as I mentioned at the beginning of this section, that the image can be seen as a reversal of the logical way of signification and as syllogistic enthymeme. In fact, Caravaggio’s painting seems to work as a baroco syllogism.\textsuperscript{26}

Baroco was a mnemonic name used by scholastic logicians to distinguish a particular kind of syllogism. The vowels A-O-O were attributed to a specific kind of proposition. The bArOcO syllogism was structured as it follows: A (positive universal premise) O (negative particular premise) O (negative particular conclusion).\textsuperscript{27} The particularity of this syllogism is that from a universal truth we move to a negative conclusion that is either impossible, or paradoxical. In both cases the syllogism would sound frivolous and captious. For example, in light of the reading I made of Caravaggio’s painting, we could make the following arguments: A) all mirrors reflect O) spotless mirrors don’t reflect O) some mirrors are not mirrors; A) sacred images are moral allegories O) Mary is not an allegory O) Mary is not sacred.

In both cases we see how from a general premise we reach a particular conclusion in open contradiction with the first universal statement. The movement from the general positive to the particular negative is what

\textsuperscript{25} This process is described by Jon Whitman as a shift from allegory to hermeneutics. See Jon Whitman. \textit{Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique}. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 282

\textsuperscript{26} On this topic a comprehensive synthesis of the major philological hypothesis is in Ezio Raimondi. \textit{Letteratura barocca: studi sul seicento italiano}. Firenze: Olschki, 1961. p. 391-396

characterizes the working of the Baroque. The detail negates the general assumption. In the case of the painting, the disposition of the mirror, its peculiar position and reflection, negate the universal value of the moral allegory. The subject faced with the Baroque is drawn into an epistemological uncertainty. Neither the universal, nor the particular seem to fulfill any condition of truth. The Baroque work of art appears to rewrite and dispute what Aristotle writes in the Prior Analytics:

For ‘to know’ can be used with three meanings: as knowing by means of universal knowledge, knowing by means of the peculiar knowledge of something, or as knowing by means of exercising knowledge; and consequently ‘to be in error’ also has the same number of meanings. Nothing then prevents someone both knowing and being in error about the same thing (although not contrarily). (Aristotle, Prior, 97)

Aristotle distinguishes between contemplation of universal knowledge (theoréin) and knowledge of the particular, (tei oikeía epistemei) admitting that one doesn’t exclude the other. Thus, an error can concern a universal knowledge without necessarily compromising the knowledge of the specific and the other way around. However, in the case of the Baroque there is knowledge of neither: the universal is contradicted by the particular and the particular doesn’t make sense without an acceptable general premise. The self is thus faced with a non-identity, with a non-recognition. Baroque it is not a techné nor a mere taste, but a dialectic between universal positive and particular negative. Baroque is an aesthetic education, a training to recognize the twofold movements of forms, which affirm and negate themselves at the same time. Paul deMan describes this process as follows:
Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designate primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as non-self.28

If it is arguable that Baroque art, among other things, is also a self-reflexive syllogism which negates its premises and that puts the subject in a “twilight zone” where theoria and episteme are equally impossible, then also the subject is forced to face the negation of his own premises in the moment of the aesthetic appreciation. As we have seen in the work of Caravaggio, the allegory outdistances its own origin remaining suspended between the literal and the symbolical. The subject itself must then negate the codes according to which that allegory was going to be interpreted. The self must then give up his vision of the world and recognize himself as a work in progress, as a form that changes shape along with the work of art.

1.5 Sacred Poetry and the Unfulfilled Allegory

So far, the example of Mary Magdalene helped us to glimpse into the complex dynamic of representation that the Baroque aesthetic involves. The work of art deploys a consolidated symbology to place the subject (reader or viewer) in a familiar setting to then unsettle its very premises by introducing combinations of images that make impossible for the text/image to fulfill its promise of meaning.

In this sense, the Baroque can be seen as a language made of illusions and disillusions, appearances and disappearances.

On the same line of my analysis of Caravaggio, I will now take into account some sonnets dedicated to the figure of the penitent Magdalene. Her image is particularly significative in this context since it represents a transitory figure: that of a woman who relinquishes her earthly life to devote herself to Christ. Yet, the poems dedicated to Magdalene represent the woman in an intermediate position, suspended between a past (her earthly life) that is no longer, and a future (her marriage with Christ) that is not yet. The temporality of Mary Magdalene reflects the rhetorical ambiguity of the Baroque sacred poetry that on hand uses symbols from the allegorical tradition and that bestows on these symbols more subtle semantic nuances on the other.

The first text I will analyze is a sonnet by Ciro di Pers\textsuperscript{29} which, despite not being dedicated to Mary Magdalene, deals with the figure of a penitent woman and it shows how the symbology related to the penitence is of both sacred and literary tradition, and that in the intersection of the two the structure of the allegory is deconstructed.

Sotto il cener del manto il foco ascoso
porta costei, ch’è umiltà risplende;
con la pietà del cor fa il ciel pietoso,
col cielo del volto i cori accende.
Per posar nel suo Dio non ha riposo,
e per difendere l’alma il corpo offende;
e sel del crin straccia il tesoro ondoso,
con le perle de gli occhi adorno il rende
Quindi mentr’ella piange il proprio errore,

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{29} All sonnets are from Giuseppe Guido Ferrero. \textit{Marino e i marinisti}. Milano: R. Ricciardi, 1954.}
adorar mi costringe il volto amato,
e mi fa reo di profanato amore.
Deh, come potrà il cielo rendere placato,
se fra i ciclici ancor m’infiamma il core,
e la sua pazienza è il mio peccato? (Ferrero, 964)

The text revolves around the clash between the sacred image of the first two stanzas, and the gaze of the poet that makes the act of penitence imperfect and incomplete in the last two stanzas. The scene describes the subject of the poet secretly looking at a woman. The first two stanzas represent the female figure caught in an act of contrition. The image is organized around pairs of antithesis: the woman wears an almost ashy mantle that hides an inner flame through which she lightens the glory of the sky. To rest in the arms of God, the woman acts restlessly, and to defend her soul she punishes her body. She tears apart her blonde wavy hair, a symbol of beauty, but at the same time embellishes herself with her eyes, pure like two pearls, which reflect her soul. The penitence of the woman consists of opposites. The image of the hair and of the eyes are of particular relevance since there are two icons of the representation of Mary Magdalene, as well as is the solitude in which the woman is caught by the poet. In a sense, Ciro di Pers, albeit not naming the holy figure, describes a temporal woman with attributes belonging to sacred figures. In the last two stanzas, the eyes of the poet have the function of breaking this almost sacred tableau with the expression of a human and earthly desire. The penitent woman and the desiring man are the polarities of an image that does not succeed in fully representing either: the woman is described in the process of becoming from a human, a heavenly beauty; the poet is aroused by the penitence of her body and his
wishful desire stains the perfection of the contrition. Her tears strike the poet and he is by them driven to adoration. Such feeling is perceived as a profane love that prohibits a complete assumption of the woman in the sky. The penitent woman is ultimately represented as an ambivalent figure that in the act of giving up her earthly beauty still entices, despite her will, a human heart to the point of a guilty desire. The stereotypes of the beautiful hair, of the eyes reflecting the inner beauty of the soul, the secluded place where the penitence takes place, and the martyr of the body are first presented in the fullness of their holiness in the first two stanzas and then reversed in their opposites in the last two sections of the poem. The text shows an unresolved polarity. A poem by Francesco Paoli (1609) explicitly dedicated to Mary Magdalene, expresses more intensively the complex problem of sacred representations and of their allegorical potential. In Alla Maddalena (To Magdalene) we read:

Venite a rimirar la gloria vostra.  
o già di Maddalena accesi amanti;  
venite a rimirar come i sembianti,  
con novello artificio, ella s’inostra.  
    Oh, d’accesa beltà leggiadra mostra!  
cangia le ricche vesti in rozzi manti,  
il riso insidioso in tristi pianti,  
i superbi palagi in umil chiostra.  
    Quel biondo crin, ch’in dolci nodi accolto  
fregiò di perle, or fra le brine e ’l gelo  
sovr’a gli omeri porta ispido, incolto.  
    E così armata di verace zelo,  
serena in core e nubilosa il volto,  
se già l’alme rapia rapisce il cielo. (Ferrero, 726)

The text describes a process of conversion through a web of antithesis. The former carnal lovers of Magdalene are invited to admire her new look, which she has put on with what the poet defines as a new, art (novella artificio): art of
charity? Art of penitence? The text is not clear at this point. The antithesis has the function of showing how Magdalene turns what was before an instrument of seduction into a spiritual appeal to God: the rich clothes become old rags; the insidious smile and sad tears; the imaginary palace of her wealthy life becomes a poor fence. The woman is imagined in a secluded place outdoor, freezing in the cold dressed in poor clothes. The beautiful hair, once adorned with pearls, is now made stiff by the cold. The description of the first three stanzas would seem to point toward an allegorical representation of the woman as exemplum of the penitent woman. Yet, the new art mentioned in the first stanza returns at the very end when the penitent look of Magdalene is associated to a weapon with which the woman captures the sky in the same way that she used to seduce men on earth. The new art is thus the sign of an incomplete transformation of the subject.

The woman is represented in a grey space between what she is no longer and what she is not yet. In this sense the poem transgresses it’s own premises: the reader is called to watch Magdalene giving up her beauty to then only find out that this gesture is again a weapon of seduction, as if the woman was using her poor clothes to trick heavens into believing the truthfulness of her repentance. I want to stress how at the level of the language the text poses a hermeneutic problem: is Magdalene a sacred figure or not? If not, how are we supposed to read the symbols associated to her figure? The iconological system and its allegorical implications are contaminated, so to speak, by a language grounded in an ambivalent and often contradictory rhetoric. An example is a sonnet by Girolamo Fontanella entitled, again, Alla Maddalena (To Magdalene):
Cangia in ruvida spoglia, in corda irsuta,
questa bella pentita il manto adorno,
pompa di vanità, fregio di scorno,
di caduca ricchezza ombra caduta.

Prima, tra lussi in maestà seduta,
mille ricche vedea cortine intorno;
or mira, entro selvaggio ermo soggiorno,
con frondosi ricami edra intessuta.

Trionfa ella del mondo, illustre ed alma,
non piú con armi di beltá profana,
ed ha sotto una palma oggi la palma.

Così, presso una limpida fontana,
de le lagrime sue purgando l’alma,
ov’era Citerea, sembra Diana. (Ferrero, 860)

The first three stanzas revolve around the symbols we have already seen. The
noble mantle is turned into a coarse and poor cloth and the woman appears as a
shadow of what she used to be. Again, we observe an antithesis between two
ideal spaces: a rich room and a secluded place in the wilderness. The pompous
curtains are now thick wild ivy. Mary is described as a triumphant figure in the
act of her penitence, and yet the last stanza casts a shadow on the fullness and
completeness of the scene. As in Ciro di Pers’ sonnet, the woman is imagined as
bathing in her own tears to amend her soul and her penitence is described as a
metamorphosis from Venus (Citerea is the island where the goddess was born) to
Diana. While it may be argued that the reference to Diana is justified by her
being often described as a chaste goddess (as opposed to the sensual Venus), at
the same time the appearance of two mythological figures in the context of a
Christian image of conversion breaks the allegorical circuit of signifiers.
Furthermore, like Diana in the myth of Atteon, Magdalene is profaned by the
eyes of the poet who, in admiring her bathing, sees her not as a sacred figure but
as a pagan goddess. Like in the myth, and like in Ciro di Pers’ sonnet, the analogy drawn by the poet between Mary and Diana makes the act of contrition somehow imperfect, suspended between a vivid representation of sacred symbols and a mythological comparison that breaks the continuity of signifiers. The analogy, as we can see, instead of strengthening the bond between the text and its allegorical meaning, it loosens it, it opens a breach in the poem. The image of the woman bathing at a spring brings into the text a total new baggage of symbols. The analogy creates more of a contrast than a similarity. This sort of non-analogical analogy, so to speak, finds a more visible expression in another sonnet dedicated to Mary Magdalene written by Giuseppe Artale centered on the image of the penitent Magdalene at a spring:

Gradir Cristo ben dee di pianto un rio,  
torrente ov’egli bee, d’alme assetato;  
se sull’acque vagò spirito e Dio,  
su l’acque a passeggiar torna incarnato;  
e se la pace a chi l’offese offrio,  
giusto ben fu, poiché pietoso e grato  
videsì a’ piè di chi piagarlo ardio  
l’aureo crin che l’insegna è del peccato.  

L’occhio e la chioma in amorosa arsura  
se ‘l bagna e ‘l terge, avvien ch’amante allumi  
stupefatto il fattor di sua fattura;  
ché il crin s’è un Tago e son due Soli i lumi;  
prodigio tal non rimirò natura:  
bagnar coi soli e rasciugar coi fiumi. (Ferrero, 1031)

The sonnet begins with the holiest of the images: moved by the tears of Mary Magdalene, Christ descends again on earth, on the water where he himself walked in life and where he recruited his disciples. Mary is imagined “washing” Christ’s feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. Yet the waves of the hair, for their sinuosity, are assimilated to a river, (Tago) and the eyes, ardent of
passion, to the sun. Thus, at the end, Mary’s penitence becomes a rhetorical oxymoron: the “sun” of the eyes washes the feet, and the “river” of the hair dry them. Christ is described as admired by such a “prodigy” never seen before in nature: the act of penitence becomes a wonderful spectacle. The rhetoric of the last stanza stresses the artificial character of the image and denies the sacred value of the entire tableaux. The sonnet moves from the sacred opening image to the artistic prodigy of the oxymoron. Instead of being instrumental to the representation of a religious allegory, rhetoric contributes to create an image that is suspended between holiness and human art; abstraction and individual technique. The allegorical representation of Mary Magdalene is an illusion instrumental to delude the subject’s expectations. The sacred image loses its allegorical unity in favor of a representation based on details open to multiple semantic readings. In this sense, the allegorical script presents itself as a cluster of fragments, pieces that the subject is left to reassemble only relying on his intuitive knowledge and creative power. The state of suspension embodied by the figure of Mary reflects the intermediate position of the Baroque subject who is called to resolve the ambiguity of the 17th century rhetoric by means of his own poetic ability. Magdalene summarizes the conflict between what the work shows and what the works represents; between what the words seem to say and what they actually refer to.

In the following section I discuss the theory of conceit as attempt of resolving the fragmentary nature of the Baroque work of art by turning the conflict between sign and meaning, visual and verbal, into a space for the
definition of a new poetic “I” capable of reading in the work of art a reflection of his own creative powers.

1.6 Tesauro and the Heroic Subject of the Impresa.

Tesauro’s treatise is the description of an aesthetic apprenticeship to the Baroque fragment. As Battistini writes, we witness in Tesauro the development of an idea of a rhetoric as “anthropological semiotics that deciphers the real populated of dense signs with specific meanings.”30 This rhetoric is epitomized in the idea of impresa.

The impresa, with its hybrid construction of words and images, becomes the expression of an aesthetic vision of the world and of the poetic subjectivity. Tesauro’s treatise Il Cannocchiale Aristotelico is underscored by a double tension between poetic identity and nature on one hand, and fiction and reality on the other. The impresa needs to be framed within the epistemological premises of the Baroque and its strategies of representation.

In this section I discuss Tesauro’s theory of the conceit. I argue that the impresa is an attempt of resolving, through a new aesthetic vision, the amorphous and incomplete nature of the Baroque fragment. The impresa embodies both theoretically and concretely the idea of Schriftbild not as a mere conjunction of words and images, but as a place where the verbal and the visual engage in a struggle to become reciprocally illustrative and suffice to each other’s

---

insufficiency. The impresa is a script, a sign that is neither graphical nor pictorial and that can be defined only negatively through a process of constant reshaping and of anamorphosis. If the Baroque can be intended as an aesthetic apprenticeship, as Benjamin suggests, the education to the Schnifbild, to the fragment and the obscure impresa, is the most challenging of the trials of this apprenticeship.

For its ambiguity, complexity, and deep theoretical implications, the theory of impresa has drawn the attention of several modern scholars who have analyzed the phenomenon from several perspectives and it has become one of the most privileged angles to observe the complexity of the relationship between visual and verbal components in the Baroque aesthetics. On one hand, the theory of impresa pushes the problem of obscurity and clarity to its extremes, and it reflects the complexity of the Baroque aesthetic experience on the other. As Robert Klein argues, the impresa represents the perfect conjunction of one of the most relevant philosophical issues of the western tradition: the relationship between visible and intelligible. Kleim observes that:

If, after the end of the 15th century the impresa was by far the most important and widespread exercise of the ‘symbolic faculty,’ this was because it was by definition a manifestation of the mind rather than a symbol to be deciphered. The beauty of the work is the beauty of the ingegno, ‘ingenuity;’ the very word concetto [conceit] used at first to describe the initial idea, came to signify a cunning form of expression. The characteristic taste for writing as an art, the taste for programs, hieroglyphs, and festivals, which was common to humanist, philosophers, ‘antiquarian,’ theologians, and many amateurs, displayed a tendency to go beyond art, and sometimes beside art, to a creative ingegno. And mind

talked to mind. [...] Therefore to speak of the impresa as art meant first of all to consider it a product of ingenuity, a work of the mind. (Klein, 16-17) Klein’s analysis of the conceit as the search of an ingenuity beyond the work of art helps to better understand the position of the subject within the flow of artistic forms. What is the aesthetic meaning of such quest? The experience of overcoming an expression made of words and images is aimed at achieving a higher sense of the poetic creation. While the twofold nature of Baroque art is revealed at the same time it obscures its origin, conversely the same art opens a gateway to a vision (theory, in its etymological sense) into the making of art itself. The impresa is a threshold between the subject and the invisible and a formless ingenuity that brings art into existence.

The ingenuity of the impresa is expressed in both a mimetic and rhetorical dimension, being constituted by what Giovio defines as a body and a soul, being the body, the image, and the soul of the writing, and the motto. As such, the experience of the impresa delivers both a sense of illusion and delusion: it persuades with the ingenuity of its construction but that very same ingenuity clearly shows its artificial nature. To understand the originality of Tesauro’s work, we need to briefly consider a couple of other texts on the subject of ingenuity. Sforza Pallavicino and Matteo Peregrini, both writing around the same years, provide us with an excellent benchmark, so to speak, of Tesauro’s originality.

32 Girolamo Ruscelli. Le Imprese Illustri. Venezia: Francesco Rampazetto, 1566. pp. 6-7
Both Peregrini (1639) and Pallavicino (1662) write within the framework of Aristotle’s Poetics, thus following the idea that the function of any figure of speech is to produce knowledge by the representation of unusual similarities between objects.\textsuperscript{33} Peregrini maintains that the pleasure of an ingenuous saying derives itself from two factors: “one is the comparison between two things related two each other, the other is the value of enthymeme of such comparison.”\textsuperscript{34} The ingenuity is thus based on a semantic relationship between the two objects on one hand, and on the possibility of deciphering such relationship through a syllogism on the other. The distinction between truth and falsehood is thus the foundation of every ingenuity and the ability of drawing the line between the two remains as the final prerogative of every style that can be rightly called “beautiful.” Similarly, Sforza Pallavicino, in his Treatise on Style and Discourse (Trattato dello stile e del dialogo) claims that the ultimate pleasure of the mind is an experience of wonder since this latter “is always accompanied by the pleasure of knowing what before was unknown.”\textsuperscript{35} Rhetoric can thus assume all the possible deceptive forms as long as the aim remains to convey the image of truth. Figures of speech unbound from any ideal of truth are considered


\textsuperscript{34} “uno si é il paragone di due cose vicendevolmente sé riguardanti; l’altro é la virtù entimematica” Matteo Peregrini, "Delle Acutezze," Trattatisti e narratori del seicento, ed. Ezio Raimondi Milano: Ricciardi, 1960. p. 113

by Pallavicino as “a pleasure for minds scarcely ingenuous, which on one hand don’t have the strength to run after an argument which continues through vigorous enthymemes, and that take pleasure in such vain decorations on the other. Yet, strong intellects consider such sayings as childish jokes.”

The idea of impresa encapsulates both this ludic and transgressive (in the sense of breaking conventionalities) aspects of the theory of the conceit. While Peregrini and Pallavicino see in them the cause of deterioration of the true poetic language, Tesauro elevates them to divine and metaphysical qualities. In the Aristotelian Telescope (Il Cannocchiale Aristotelico), first published in 1654, Emanuele Tesauro reworks these features into a theory of the conceit as a mirror of the deep creative nature of the subject who, in the fruition and production of artistic crafts, discovers its place within Nature and God.

Tesauro contextualizes the debate on conceit outside the rigid epistemological framework based on the distinction between truth and falsehood. His vision of the subject’s ability to create original verbal and figurative combinations has a cosmic dimension and it reveals both the nature and the place occupied by the subject in the world. To use Bartoli terminology, it may be argued that Emanuele Tesauro’s theory of conceit and of the impresa is an attempt to turn the errare and the overwhelming experience of the forms into a mirror that reflect the creative powers of the subject and its intuitive skills.

36 “[…] piacere a lettori d’ingegno debole, come a tali che da una parte non hanno lena per correr dietro ad un discorso il quale sempre camini con passi di vigorosi entimemi; e che dall’altra parte ritrovano in que’ lustrini doppia materia di piacimento. […] Ma gli intelletti gagliardi […] prendono a vile si fatti scherzi quasi puerili. (203-204)
Tesauro sees ingenuity as “vestige of the Divine into the human” (vestigio della Divinitá nell’Animo Humano)\textsuperscript{37} and, as such, it is regarded as the faculty that makes the subject closer to God with the ability of bringing things to life:

> through the miracle of ingenuity what is mute speaks, the senseless live and the dead are resurrected. Trumpets, marbles, and statue are given voice by the spellbinding ingenuity, and they ingenuously speak with ingenuous men. Everything that is not inflated by ingenuity may be considered dead. (Tesauro, 2)

The analogy between life and ingenuity is not circumstantial, since like life ingenuity also has mysterious and obscure origins that only a Divine mind could understand. Tesauro maintains that whoever creates ingenuous and beautiful things rarely is able to account for them: “the more powerful is an ingenuous construction, the more obscure is its origin” (Tesauro, 2). Like Bartoli, Tesauro uses the image of a river to depict the nature of ingenuity, claiming that this is “like the Nile of which we know the tributaries ignoring the real source” (Tesauro, 2). Here the river represents an image of obscurity and not of truth. Yet, the obscurity is seen as a gateway to the mystery of the subject’s creative capabilities. Such insight resembles madness because it puts together things previously conceived as unrelated. Tesauro asks “what is madness if not a big metaphor that always sees things in their reversed side?” (Tesauro, 83). Like madness, the impresa brings together the opposites; it is a totality in presentia and in absentia: it constitutes a totality in itself with the reciprocity of image and writing, but at the same time its full meaning is unveiled only beyond itself.

God being “an ingenuous talker” (un arguto favellatore. Tesauro, 54) the whole world appears as a big impresa. In Bartoli the sky is considered to be image of the truth as opposed to the earth, land of the errare. On the contrary, Tesauro looks at the sky as a “cerulean shield where the ingenuous nature draws what it thinks, shaping heroic imprese, mysterious and witty symbols for its secretes” (Tesauro, 68). The world is intended thus as an ingenuous creation where no determinate differentiations are given except the unpredictable connections of rhetoric, of language, and of the witty expressions. The impresa, with its hybrid structure of words and images, represents the ultimate expression of ingenuity because in order to produce them the subject must undergo an aesthetic education that requires “divine furor, agile ingenuity, and hard training” (Tesauro, 578). These three qualities respectively come from the sky, nature, and human work. The creation of an ingenuous device such as the impresa allows the subject to ideally join the three dimensions of divinity, nature, and humanity. The truth that the subject is capable thus of understanding and representing the product of a poetic construction, of the subject’s ability to shape language in new and unseen forms. As Tesauro writes, “human ingenuity rejoices more in contemplating a dressed rather than a bare truth” (Tesauro, 15). The dress is not just a rhetorical ornament or a persuasive device to miscere utile dulci, but the disguise of a subject that reveals itself in a chiaroscuro play. The ultimate pleasure for the subject is not to discover a truth, but rather “to bring to light with ingenuity what someone else’s ingenuity has hidden” (involar col proprio ingengo ciò che l’altrui ingegno furtivamente nasconde, Tesauro, 16). An
ingenious work of art reveals its own formless origin. In its indistinct vision, the subject gains insight into the absolute power of ingenuity as a creative force that binds together God, Nature, and Man. The example of perfect impresa that Tesauro mentions can also be read in meta-critical terms, as a mirror of the aesthetic experience of the impresa itself. To Tesauro, such is the Louis XII family symbol:

![Image of a porcupine with the text "Cominus et Eminus" representing the Louis XII family symbol.]

The image represents a porcupine accompanied by the writing, “Cominus et Eminus,” which means “at a distance and nearby.” To Tesauro this impresa is perfect as it balances writing and painting. The porcupine can intimidate with its crest at a distance and it can harm with it if it is approached close up. Such behavior resembles the one of a king who, without necessarily engaging in wars, can keep his enemies at a distance by threatening them with the “crest” of his arms. Yet, the crucial point in Tesauro is that the aesthetic function of the impresa
is not exhausted in recognizing the analogy among the parts that constitute it. The impresa works precisely, because like this porcupine attracts attention, it at the same time maintains its distance, and it lends itself to be understood but not entirely solved. Once an impresa has been deciphered, so to speak, it is time to build a new one. Tesauro’s treatise is not so much about the decrypting the symbols of which an ingenuous work is made of, but to push the subject to identify himself with the creative mind behind it and to become a creator of imprese himself. It is in the production, in the experience of how an impresa comes to life that its function is depleted. As I mentioned before, the totality of the image is both in presentia and in absentia: it is complete in itself but always refers to something else left outside of the representation. This twofold nature makes the impresa a vivid example of what Maravall defines as trope of the incompleteness. The challenge of the Baroque subject is to embrace this incomplete totality with the ingenuity of his mind and of his creations.

The ingenuous subject is therefore neither an imitator nor a stylist, but almost a hero of a journey of discovery into the secret bonds between the realms of Man, Nature and God. In making men closer to God, ingenuity brings along the misfortunes of a venture beyond the limits of prudence and what is conventional. The Baroque aesthetic education becomes also then a daring, heroic gesture:

There is a big difference between prudence and ingenuity. Ingenuity is sharper, quicker, and deals with the appearances of things. Prudence on the contrary is wiser, steady, and it deals with truth. Prudence wants to be useful, while ingenuity seeks for admiration and people’s consent. Not by chance many ingenuous men were thus called divine since like God, what doesn’t exist comes into being through their will: a lion becomes a man,
and an eagle a city. Ingenuity merges the upper part of fish on the body of woman as symbol of adultery; it takes the head of a goat and joins it to the bottom of a snake and it creates the Chimera as hieroglyph of madness. For this reason many philosopher used to call ingenuity a particle of God, and some more a gift given by God to his favorites. However, to be truthful, those that God esteem the most should ask for prudence rather than ingenuity since prudence always brings fortune, while ingenuous men, beside rare exceptions, are always unlucky. Prudence leads men to glory and wealth, while ingenuity bring men directly to an asylum.  

That of ingenuity is a full identity, it describes a certain kind of subjectivity capable of finding its way within the net of appearances of the real, searching for the marvel of his divine creative power rather than the truth and its benefits. The comparison of ingenuity to madness becomes more organic, intrinsic to the very nature of the poetic subject. In the making and in the perception of ingenuous works such as the imprese, the subject experiences the deep creative essence of the divine and of the natural, gaining a vision of the folds of the dresses that always cloaks the body of truth. In a sense, experiencing reality as a script, as enigmatic web of images and words, is an extreme experience that borders with

---

38 Non piccola differenza dunque passa tra Prudenza ed ingegno. Peroche l’ingegno è piú perspicace ; la Prudenza piú sensata: quello è piú veloce, questa piú salda; quello considera le apparenze, questa la verità: e dove questa ha per fine la propria utilitá, quello ambisce l’ammirazione, e l’applauso de’ popolari. Quinci, non senza qualche ragione gli uomini ingegnosi furono chiamati divini. Peroché, sicome il Dio di quel che non è produce quel che è, cosí l’ingegno di no-Ente, fa Ente. In serire passagio: fa che il leone divenga un huomo, e l’acquila una città. Inesta una femina sopra un pesce e fabrica una Sirena per simbolo dell’Adulatore. Accopia un busto di capra al deretano di una serpe e forma la Chimera per Hieroglifico di Pazzia. Onde fra gli antiqui Filosofi alcuni chiamaron l’ingegno Particella della Mente Divina., e’ altri un regalo mandato da Iddio a’ suoi piú cari. Benché, per dir vero, gli amici d’Iddio dovrebbero con piú caldi voti chiedere Prudentzache l’ingegno, peroche la Prudenza comanda alla fortuna, ma l’Ingegnosi (se non se per miracolo) sono sfortunati, e dove quella conduce gli uomini alla dignitá e agli agi, questo gli invia allo spedale. (Tesauro, 76)
the delusion that all reality can be nothing but a big impresa that hides its principle in a blur of words and images.

I believe that this is the reason why Tesauro defines the ingenuous as lapidary (lapidario) for its concise character but also for its deadly nature (lapide, gravestone): in the force of its uniqueness, the ingenuous sign draws the subject into an ecstatic aesthetic experience and yet, by revealing its artificial nature it exerts an effect of estrangement on the subject leading him beyond his own appearance where no exact distinction between truth and falsehood exists. The subject is metaphorically driven to an asylum for the impossibility of determining the threshold that separates appearances and reality, words and images, figures and meaning.

I would like to suggest in conclusion of this chapter, that the theory of imprese as described by Tesauro, marks an ideal trajectory between two different and yet complementary visions of the universe. If the conceit is a way for the subject of placing himself in the realm of Nature and God, at the same time it is a way to understand how this very realm works. Through the work of imprese, the subject familiarizes itself with the image of the world as anamorphosis, as mutation and never ending flowing of forms. Ultimately, the Baroque fragment as incomplete and yet “total” experience of the intellect provides the gateway to an intuitive form of knowledge which does not rely on the traditional structures of the discourse, but which rather appeals to the subject’s ability to poetically comprehend in itself the totality of the forms that compound the real. Art, knowledge and subjectivity become the vertexes of the same triangle. Tesauro’s
theory of conceit becomes thus the taxonomy of a subject that heroically explores the limits of representation.

The heroic gesture of the impresa is a response to the void left by the Baroque allegory: the absence of a definite meaning becomes a familiar space where the subject discovers his poetic freedom, his liberty of creating always changing forms as part of the flowing of nature. The blending of the confines between words and images, abstract meaning and materiality of the sign, produces a new bond between art and subjectivity and of language and truth: the construction of a truthful representation of the real is not inextricable from the construction of a subject’s language, of rhetorical and visual figures. As such the Baroque questions the very meaning of what we intend as art, as fictional, as a product of the imagination. I proposed to look at the Baroque as a starting point of a new vision of art as a self-reflexive mirror of the poetic identity of the self by playing with the borders between illusion and delusion.

In the following chapter, through the analysis of the works of Giambattista Vico, I intend to show how the Baroque conceit, with its chiaroscuro nature, becomes a textual strategy aimed at the construction of a new philosophical discourse. Vico transforms the Baroque conceit into a rhetorical instrument for the definition of a philosophical text where the reader is called to build the truth by working along the lines of imagination and ingenuity; by assembling the visual and the verbal materials in the text according to an inner vision. Vico retrieves the heroic dimension of Tesauro’s subject building an ideal reader that, through a poetic reading of the philosophical text, is able to intuitively
understand the design behind the text beyond the language and figures that compound it.
2. VICO’S PHILOSOPHICAL SUBJECT AS A BAROQUE READER

Where Vico's Scienza Nuova is really ill written, it is also ill thought out. If we pass from the consideration of big books to a short proposition, the error or the imprecision of this statement will be recognized at once. How could a proposition be clearly thought and confusedly written out?

B. Croce

Vico had the rare gift of impreciseness.
M. Fubini

In the first chapter I argued that the crisis of the classical institution of allegory is the origin of a new strategy of representation of the relationship between subjectivity and aesthetics. I argued that the Baroque art enacts a fragmentation of the traditional allegorical iconology thus redefining the position of the subject in relation to the work of art. The Baroque subject does no longer simply accomplishes an exegesis of the work but it is inscribed within the borders of the work itself: the work of art requires the subject to be a poetic agent, to be able to adjust his eyes and understanding to the different levels of significations that the work presents. The ingenuous subject of the Baroque is a poetic "I" capable of reading and producing conceits; of placing himself in the gray zone between what the work shows and what the work signifies; between what the work presents and what a work re-presents.

In this chapter I argue that Vico turns the Baroque subject into the ideal reader of the New Science. In building his philosophical discourse, Vico outlines the features of a new subject of philosophy who progressively develops poetic skills that enable him to read and understand the ingenuous web of images of the New Science. I argue that such subject is indispensable to Vico in order to set the rhetorical machine of the New Science into motion. It is only through a
metamorphosis of the philosophical subject into a poetic reader that Vico’s philosophy can reach the vision of truth.

This chapter is organized in four sections. In the first part I analyze Vico’s dipintura arguing that the structure of the image reflects the steps of the formation of Vico’s new philosophical subject, thus contending the traditional allegorical interpretation of the painting. In the second section I argue that Vico intends his ideal reader as a heroic mind able to read in the folds of different levels of the philosophical discourse. In the third section I analyze the forms through which the reader’s heroic mind unfolds itself in the reading of the New Science. I argue that Vico creates in his orations two masks for such reader: Daedalus, representing the poetic ingenuity and Euclid, representing the geometrical mind. In the fourth and final section I illustrate how Vico’s ideal reader becomes the subject of the aesthetic experience of the sublime which I argue is first of all a textual construction which, like a Baroque conceit, has the function of creating an ideal communion between the reader’s and the author’s imagination blurring the distance between the two.

2.1 Vico’s dipintura and the Baroque Conceit

In my reading, the composition of the dipintura is a self-reflexive image of the working of the text on one hand, and of the reader’s imagination on the other. The structure of the image reflects the steps that Vico’s subject of philosophy must take in order to embark in the journey of the history of nations that is the narrative of the New Science. I contend that each moment of the image describes
a different moment in the formation of the ideal reader of the New Science, who is called by Vico to ingeniously read the text by folding and unfolding the complex web of images that constitutes the core of his philosophical discourse. My interpretation of the dipintura differs from the tradition allegorical reading of the image as epitomized by two of the most important critics on the topic, Mario Papini and Angus Fletcher, whose theories I will now briefly account for in order to better illustrate and define where my reading is placed in the contemporary scholarly debate.

In Il Geroglifico della Storia (The Hieroglyph of History) Papini argues that the opening painting embodies a conflict between the search for an eternal truth and the temporality of the writing. Papini’s analysis relies on the polarity between the two words that form the name of the first section of the New Science, “idea dell’opera” (idea of the work) which, according to the critic, is a translation of the verum ipsum factum principle, being idea the verum, and work the factum. In this perspective, the dipintura “cements the instance of eternity and the instance of temporality; vision of the resolutive cyclicality of divine Providence and the dramatic conflicts of human history where, in the progress of time, good and evil constantly turn into each other.”39 This approach implies an essentially symbolic reading of the dipintura that, besides being somehow a duplicate of the explanation that Vico himself provides, reduces the image to an

allegory, system of signs that stands for an abstract meaning.\textsuperscript{40} The materiality of the image itself and of its aesthetic implications as stand alone work is overlooked. The materiality of the dipintura as an image, and not just as exemplification of the New Science is instead analyzed by Angus Fletcher in On the Syncretic Allegory of the New Science.\textsuperscript{41}

Fletcher maintains that Vico’s work is based on an entire allegorical narrative. From this perspective, the dipintura is considered as the “emplotment” of the whole New Science where “what is emblematically stilled by the engraving becomes active and dynamic in the whole work” (Fletcher, Syncretic Allegory, 30). Thus, the image, rather than a synecdochic allegory must be looked at as a syncretic allegory, for its being the envisioning of a plot to be developed in the writing. The poetic development into a narrative is symbolized by the use of the serpentine line that joins the figures in the painting by designing an ideal “S” trajectory. According to Fletcher, “this formal suggestion produces a conceptual figuration, since the materials producing the S’s are entirely man-made, i.e. artificial. In short, we are looking at yet another powerful Vichian indicator that

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{40} Domenico Pietropaolo, in discussing the relationship between Vico’s autobiography and allegory, proposes a distinction between synecdochic and metaphorical allegory: “Synecdochic allegory is a special form of thought; many allegories depend instead on metaphor or simile. What distinguishes synecdoche is that it is grounded in ontological continuity, whereas metaphor and simile, which are frequently used as models of thinking, cannot operate without discontinuity.”Domenico Pietropaolo, "Scrissela da filosofo: the life of Giambattista Vico written by himself," Autobiography as Philosophy. The Philosophical Uses of Self-Presentation, ed. Thomas Mathien and D. G. Wright. New York: Routledge, 2006. p. 116
  \item \textsuperscript{41} Angus Fletcher, "On the Syncretic Allegory of the New Science," New Vico Studies 4.4 (1986). p. 24-43
\end{itemize}
he wants us to read his discourse in terms of poetic figuration rather than strict
deductive logic” (Fletcher, Syncretic Allegory, 36). Yet, Fletcher’s reading, like
Papini’s, focuses on the meaning as a whole of the dipintura in the economy of
the text overlooking the particular dynamic between the single elements that
compose the image.

Next to the allegorical reading of scholars like Papini and Fletcher, I
propose to consider Vico’s dipintura as a meta-critical reflection on the making
itself of the New Science and of its ideal reader. Next to an allegorical reading, I
believe that the dipintura necessitates a deeper analysis of its composition as
concrete image. I argue that the painting that opens the New Science is not just
an emplotted narrative or a synthesis of Vico’s philosophical quest, but also a
mirror that reflects the formation of Vico’s ideal reader, a subject able to read the
philosophical discourse in poetic and not only logical terms. I believe that the
serpentine line of the dipintura represents the modality of reading that Vico
advocates for his own text. The serpentine line is a rhetorical modality, not only

42 According to Fletcher, by stressing the poetic figuration of the dipintura, Vico
persuades the reader to accept the author’s “belief in the equivalence of homo
sapiens with homo faber as a metaphysical act of faith; and once one has taken
this step, then one has granted that Vico gets his discordia concors to harmonize
because he succeeds in compressing a vast collection of fragments together under
the one visionary roof of his poetics (Fletcher, Syncretic Allegory, 29).
painterly. The crucial detail that needs to be clearly brought at the center of the attention is the meaning and function of the serpentine line.43

As John Shearman argues in Mannerism, the figura serpentinata, “is developed from the classical contrapposto […] word also used for a figure of speech much favored by Petrarch,”44 an it thus implies a rhetorical significance beside a figurative value:

The contrapposti do not entail contrasts between static and dynamic functions in the members, nor between weight bearing and free. Movements are completed, not arrested; and thus they seem neither to reflect a past action nor to anticipate a new one. (Shearman, 83)

If the serpentine line works as a contrapposto, as an antithesis that lacks a clear temporal definition, is it possible to consider Vico’s use of this mannerist visual stratagem as having not just a figural value, but also the rhetorical function of creating a state of suspension in the reader’s mind? To answer this question I propose to compare Vico’s dipintura with the painting that opens Tesauro’s Cannocchiale Aristotelico.

Such analysis is aimed at: 1) showing how Vico figuratively reworks the idea of Baroque conceit in a philosophical directions; 2) illustrating how Vico builds an epistemology of the chiaroscuro through a sophisticated interplay of


lights and shadows; 3) how the serpentine line reflects the formation of an ideal subject of philosophy intended as ingenuous reader of conceits.

The dipintura was first introduced in the 1730 edition along with its long explanation. Through the painting Vico manages to fill in a textual void, but also to provide a first important amend to what he believed to be the crucial mistake of the first edition of the New Science: “[Vico] in the First New Science did not make any mistake in the general argument, but in the order of exposition, since he dealt with the origin of ideas separately from the origin of languages while the two things coincide” (Vico, Vita, 69). Vico makes up for his “mistake” in the dispositio by introducing the painting and its explanation together, which is by bringing together ideas as eidos, vision, and language as material signs.

Let’s begin by taking into account the 1744 final version of the dipintura next to the painting that opens Tesauro’s Cannocchiale Aristotelico. Beside some glaring structural similarities, which I believe may have been of inspiration to Vico, it seems to me that by building an intertextual (in this case we may say inter-visual) reference with the major text on the Baroque conceit, Vico implicitly

---

45 The practical reasons that lead Vico to adopt the strategy of the painting and the spiegazione are described in the appendix to his autobiography. See Giambattista Vico, "Vita scritta da se medesimo," Opere, ed. Andrea Battistini. Milano: Mondadori, 2001. pp. 69-85

suggests a meta-critical reading of the image, rather than an allegorical interpretation.

The similarities are in the disposition of the figures, almost specular to each other, and in their general organization that resembles, as Fletcher notes, the trajectory of a serpentine line. The aesthetic relevance of the two images revolves around the functioning of this ideal “S.” The figures can be grouped in pairs:

1) The Divine Triangle of the dipintura and the “spotted” sun of Tesauro’s.
2) The standing body of the Metaphysics and the half lying figure of Poetry sustained by Aristotle.
3) The standing statue Homer and the seating body painting.
4) The “hieroglyphs of history” and the family crests or imprese. These correspondences are not just structural, but also semantic. The serpentine lines are the specular reversal of each other. If we observe the introductory painting of the Cannocchiale Aristotelico we may notice how the serpentine line designs a trajectory that organically links the parts of the figure, which correspond to different moments of Tesauro’s argument. The line creates this sequence: 1) from the spotted sun, symbol of the “ingenuous nature,” the line moves to the image of poetry; 2) this is represented on the model established by Ripa’s Iconology, but the trumpet (one of the two canonical symbol along with lute, visible on the left of the figure) is turned into a telescope, held by Aristotle, through which poetry observes the sun. The instrument that literally gives voice to poetry becomes an instrument of vision; 3) Similarly, the image of painting, which traditionally was represented with a gag on her mouth, is portrayed with her mouth unbound and in the act of depicting a written optical illusion. While then poetry is silenced, painting is given voice by the drawing of letters; 4) Finally, the line reaches the shields and the family crests on the ground which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, represent in Tesauro’s view the ultimate expression of ingenuity, and thus the perfect conceit. The serpentine line rather than creating a conceit, it reflects the argumentative structure of the Cannocchiale Aristotelico. Vico recuperates this meta-textual function of the image on one


hand, yet it transforms it into a conceit philosophically oriented on the other. In Vico’s dipintura, the serpentine line joints figures that have a less evident semantic relationship and therefore it imprints on the image the force of a conceit in the sense of a non self-explanatory association of images. Vico discusses the conceit in chapter 37 of the Institutiones Oratoriae, entitled “On the Gnomic Sentences, or the art of speaking in conceits” (De Sententiis, Vulgo ‘Del Ben Parlare in Concetti’).

To Vico the ingenuous saying is not rooted in the distinction between truth and lies (as for Peregrini, Comanini and Paleotti, which I discussed in the first chapter) but has an intuitive poetic character as creative medium of knowledge: “the sources of the acute sayings are not two, the truth that looks like false and the false that looks truth, and thus their virtue does not stem from a symbolic meaning (as in the first case) or from a paradoxical nature (as in the second). Their origin is one: the unveiling of a hidden truth by means of an original and quick medium.” Vico’s definition of acuteness plays a crucial role in understanding the visual and verbal strategies of the New Science.

Vico uses the verb detergo (to reveal) in the reflexive form. Truth is not the object of a revelation but rather it unveils itself. It is not acuteness or ingenuity that brings the truth to light but somehow the other way around. Vico uses the


50 “[...] videtis non esse duos dictorum acutorum fontes, falsum, quod videatur verum, et verum, quod videatur falsum, et quod ex primo in symbolica dicta, ex altero in paradoxa acuminis virtus derivetur; sed omnium unam esse originem: verum, quod lateat ac novo raroque invento medio celeriter et facile detegatur” (Vico, Institutiones, 299).
generic term of medium to signify the form in which the truth emerges. Vico does not specify whether the medium must be verbal or figural. The characteristics of this medium must be rarity and originality (rarum and inventum) in order to convey the image of truth simply and quickly (facile et celeriter). The quickness plays a crucial role. The nature of enthymeme of the ingenuous saying must reveal itself in a quick and instantaneous vision of the eye. Vico draws attention not to the nature of the message, but to the medium, to the vehicle itself of communication. The invisible influence of Tesauro is to be found in the attention that Vico grants to the formation of a medium, either verbal, or figural, or both, as a threshold between the ingenuous activity of the subject and the latent force of the truth that seeks its own representation. Vico inherits from Tesauro the idea of ingenuity not just as rhetorical device to communicate a message but as point of view on the world and the subject’s creative powers.\textsuperscript{51} The quick vision of a latent truth requires a medium capable of arising what Tesauro defines as a “suspended state of mind”\textsuperscript{52} that can be fully obtained through the hybrid form of the impresa which, in merging words and images, goes beyond both and it allows a glimpse into the very essence of ingenuity as revealing force. Vico searches for a medium facile and celer and for

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}
this reason Tesauro, instead of finding a place within the frame of the Institutiones Oratoriae, a didactic text aimed at the acquisition of a practical knowledge of rhetoric, it enters the dipintura with the mannerism of its serpentine line.53 In other words, Tesauro works more as operative model rather than scholastic model, showing how, as Massimo Lollini notes, for Vico there is a clear line between “rhetoric” and “poetics,” between actual construction of performative figure of speeches and didactic precepts.54 Vico inherits from Tesauro the images of a silent poetry and a speaking painting; two languages that only in their interplay achieve a conspicuous representation of their object. The serpentine line expresses the nature of the dipintura as a medium between words and images on one hand, and vision and imagination on the other. The dipintura tells without saying everything and represents without showing everything: like a Baroque conceit it shows by hiding and it reveals by veiling some of his parts.

The ray of light that goes from the triangle to the metaphysics, from this latter to Homer, and that from Homer ideally reaches the fasces in the lower right corner, reveals a path among some elements of the painting, and at the same time it partially reveals, in shade, the shape of other possible trajectories. The serpentine movement cuts the painting into different sections and impresses on it a strong dynamic character. The first narrative of the dipintura is thus its shaping

53 On the “mannerist” aspects of Vico’s theory of conceit see Leo Catana. 

as conceit since, with its curves and angulations, includes and excludes from sight, determining a foreground and a background.

If we compare the 1730 and 1744 editions of the New Science, we may notice a slight change in the explanation of the dipintura that shows Vico’s growing understanding of his own dipintura as a conceit. In the 1730 edition, Vico defines the author of the painting (i.e. Domenico Vaccaro) as “divine painter,” (divin pittore),\(^\text{55}\) while in the 1744 edition the painter is instead called “ingenuous” (ingegnoso pittore).\(^\text{56}\) The change is crucial and confers upon the image a more poetic meaning, whereas ‘divine’ suggests a more abstract and transcendent significance of the image. In fact, by comparing the deployment of the hidden “S’s” in Tesauro and Vico, we may see where and how the dipintura parts from its model.

In Tesauro’s painting the hidden “S” line runs specular to the main one (dotted blue line in Figure 2): from the upper left corner it reaches the lower right corner. It moves from a shield (ingenuous artifact) to the figure of painting, then to the one of poetry to finally reach the Roman fasces which reminds to the shield on top of the image. Both the main “S” and the hidden “S” follow a path that from a symbol of ingenuity moves to another of a different kind (from the spotted sun to the shields, and to a shield to the Roman fasces). Either way they cross the central figures of painting and poetry creating a true specular version of each other. As Sherman writes, the contrapposti are resolved in the perfect

---


accomplishment of a plastic movement. The antithesis is only apparent and it does not create any real effect of foreground and background. In Vico’s dipintura things work quite differently.

If we trace the pattern of the hidden “S” line (dotted blue line in Figure 1) we see how it follows a complete different path and how it does not meet any of the figures crossed by the main “S” shape. The line moves from the upper left corner to the lower right corner and ideally joins the following sections in this order: 1) the dark clouded sky 2) the edge of the open sky where the light passes through 3) the forest with the burial urn in front of it and 4) the basis of Homer’s statue. The hidden serpentine line brings together all images of obscurity, with the effect of creating not only a clear distinction between a background and a foreground, but also of building an interplay between images of lights and shadows which bestows upon the image a chiaroscuro atmosphere. In this regard Stefania Sini argues, in Figure vichiane, that the News Science builds an isotopy of light and the most of its figurative language revolves around images of light and darkness. Sini writes:

The luminosity of Vico discoveries originates from the very systematic construction of the text and its structure, to which the author dedicates the entire first book. The introduction to the New Science, is a rigorous place where everything is put in order and where the reader is asked to retain everything in its mind as vademecum for the following pages. This place, which breaks the obscurity, is evoked by images rather than words. If we look at the dipintura, we see that the page is dominated by strong chiaroscuro tones. [...] We perceive a sort of geometrical chiaroscuro emerging from the page; an emergence, which alludes to the particular interplay of different discursive levels in the text and of different semiotic
I believe that rather than a place of order, the opening pages of the New Science must be seen as a meta-critical reflection of the work on its own limits and potentialities. Vico inherits the Baroque idea of chiaroscuro as epistemological perspective on the real. In the dipintura the contrast of the two serpentine lines is not simply a way to give relief to a certain symbolic chain of elements, but it is a way to represent the working itself of the New Science as text and as narrative. The meta-critical aspect of the dipintura, lies in the intersection of the two serpentine lines, the one of the chiaro (that goes from God to the Roman fasces) and the other of the scuro (from the cloudy sky to the base Homer’s statue). In conclusion of the “explanation” Vico writes:

The whole idea of this work may be summed up as follows. The darkness in the background of the picture is the material of this Science, uncertain, unformed, obscure, which is set forth in the Chronological Table and in the Notes upon it. The ray with which divine providence lights up the breast of metaphysic represents the Axioms, Definitions and Postulates that this Science takes as Elements from which to deduce the Principles on which it is based and the Method by which it proceeds. All these things are contained in the first book. The ray that is reflected from the breast of metaphysic onto the statue of Homer is the proper light which is given to poetic wisdom in the second book, and by which the true Homer is elucidated in the third book. By "The Discovery of the True Homer" everything that makes up this world of nations is clarified, proceeding from their origins according to the order in which the hieroglyphs come forth into the light of the true Homer. This is the Course of Nations considered in the fourth book. And having arrived finally at the foot of the

---

Vico clearly describes a movement that goes from darkness to light. Yet, what is in plain sight is visible only through its contrast with the obscure background. The two serpentine lines validate and negate each other at the same time. It is in the reversal of the two, in the gray space in between, that the reading of the New Science happens and the text itself becomes the mediator between obscurity and clarity. Vico’s frontispiece tries to harmonize two antithetic but interrelated tendencies of representation, one toward a chiaro, and one toward a scuro. The serpentine line entails a dynamic vision, it does not create the effect of a synoptic table.

The tangle of lines of the two serpentine lines recalls a rhetorical chiastic structure. Interestingly, in a passage from the 1730 version of the dipintura’s explanation, later emended from the 1744 edition, Vico resorts to a chiasm in order to put in relation the image, the explanation, and the reader itself of the New Science. We read:

---

58 “Laonde tutta l’idea di quest’opera si può chiudere in questa somma. Le tenebre nel fondo della dipintura sono la materia di questa Scienza, incerta, informe, oscura, che si propone nella Tavola cronologica e nelle a lei scritte Annotazioni. Il raggio del quale la divina provvedenza alluma il petto alla metafisica sono le Dignità, le Diffinizioni e i Postulati, che questa Scienza si prende per Elementi di ragionar i Principi co' quali si stabilisce e 'l Metodo con cui si conduce: le quali cose tutte son contenute nel libro primo. Il raggio che da petto alla metafisica si risparmia nella statua d’Omero è la luce propria che si dà alla Sapienza poetica nel libro secondo, dond’è il vero Omero schiarito nel libro terzo. Dalla Discorventa del vero Omero vengono poste in chiaro tutte le cose che compongono questo mondo di nazioni, dalle lor origini progredendo secondo l'ordine col quale al lume del vero Omero n'escono i geroglifici: ch'è il Corso delle nazioni, che si ragiona nel libro quarto; e, pervenute finalmente a' piedi della statua d'Omero, con lo stess'ordine ricominciando, ricorrono: lo che si ragiona nel quinto ed ultimo libro.” Vico, Scienza Nuova ’44, p.35
Oh Reader, you will certainly understand the beauty of this painting if you compare it to the ugliness of this other one all upside-down which I now show you. The bright TRIANGLE that oversees everything -the divine Providence that rules over everything- illuminates the mundane globe where the WINGS of the metaphysics are nailed on the opposite side of the globe, the one in the shadow: because it does not want to know and rise above the World of Nature. […]

The words in italics and capital letters have been transcribed as they appear on the original 1730 edition of the New Science. The detail is crucial in visualizing the textual strategy of Vico. This passage is in fact only the beginning of a long purely verbal description of a reversed dipintura, where all the symbols are shown in their negative counterpart.

Vico imagines a metaphysics nailed to the globe, a ruined altar, the statue of Homer crashed onto the ground and so on. Vico provides the reader with a representation of the other side of the image believing that the image itself can be understood only if contemplated on the background of its negative reversal, as if the dipintura was created by the “divine painter” (who then becomes “ingenuous” in 1744) in a struggle against the darkness of the false knowledge. In such negative description, Vico displays the epistemological meaning of the painting and its function in the whole architecture of the New Science. If we look more closely to the words he uses and how he distributes them on the page, we may notice how even on the level of the language Vico builds a web of

59 Potrai facilmente, o Leggitore, intendere la bellezza di questa divina dipintura dall' orrore che, certamente, dee farti la bruttezza di quest'altra ch'ora ti do a vedere tutta contraria.—Il TRIGONO luminoso e veggenti allumi il globo mondano; che' è la Provvedenza divina, la quale il governa.—La falsa e quindi rea Metafisica abbia l'ALE delle tempie inchiovate al globo dalla parte opposta coverture d'ombre perché non possa (e non può), perché non voglia (ne sa, perché non vuole) alzarsi sopra il mondo della natura; […] (Vico, Scienza Nuova ’30, 55) pp. 55. Translation mine.
intertwined lines by using a chasm. Let’s look at the words in italic: at the beginning of the passage we have the reader (leggitore), then the beauty of the painting (bellezza della dipintura), and then the ugliness of the other dipintura all upside-down (la bruttezza di quest’altra tutta contraria). We thus have one subject, the reader, and two specular pairs. Graphically the passage could be represented like this:

![Graphical representation of the passage](image)

As we see, Vico creates in the structure of the sentence itself a reversal of the dipintura. By juxtaposing the pairs the painting is associated to ugliness and the other painting to beauty: the exchange of positions reveals the ambivalent and unsteady nature of the dipintura itself, the meaning of which, as we are told by Vico, can be understood only by unfolding the image through its specular opposite. The reader is in the middle of this chasm, it is the point of intersection of the two sides of the image, of the two serpentine lines of the chiaro and of the scuro. Like Hermes’ caduceus, the reader builds its identity in the text by bringing together opposites forces, by harmonizing with its understanding what
apparently is utterly divided: the reader must, in a word, be ingenuous as the painting itself on one hand, and become a point of intersection of lights and shadows on the other. The reader must be able to follow the two serpentine lines at the same time and thus be able to see at once both the dipintura before the eyes in light, but also its reversal, its scuro side.

I believe that the position of the subject in relation to the New Science as text is mirrored by the position of the dipintura as epistemological threshold of the philosophical discourse. This subject is placed between the visible and the invisible, between a concrete dipintura and its hidden reversal. The subject of Vico’s philosophy is an ideal reader able to refine his intellectual tools and its ability of seeing between the folds of the philosophical discourse. This reader is in fact a chiasm itself, a subject capable of, so to speak, read between the lines, to see each word in its reversal. In the following two sections I will map the stages of the ideal aesthetic education that Vico’s philosophical subject must undertake to set into motion the chiaroscuro epistemology of the New Science. I argue that in the orations De mente heroica and De nostri temporis stordiorum ratione Vico builds not only a pedagogical model for the humanistic studies, but also the image of an ideal reader of his own philosophical discourse. As I will show, this ideal reader must combine the quality of a “heroic mind” and of a comparative and ingenuous intellect.
2.2 The Heroic Subject as Ideal Reader of the New Science

Vico requires from the reader of the New Science the effort of training his ingenuity and imagination. Vico’s subject must be able to see the philosophical implications in the folds of the serpentine lines that compound not only the dipintura, but in a sense the entire New Science. In this section I argue that in De mente heroica (On the Heroic Mind) Vico creates a parallel between heroism and ingenuity creating the image of a heroic reader.

In De mente heroica Vico addresses young students about to engage in humanistic studies:

Noble youths, it is convenient for you to apply yourself to studies not to acquire wealth since in doing so you will be easily outdone by vulgar and sordid people; not to reach one day a high place of power since in doing so you will be by far outdone by courtesans used to dealing with swords; not even to obtain what philosophers want who, praise of their own thirst for wisdom are happy to live their entire life secluded in the shadow in order to rejoice of their laziness and tranquility of spirit.

The ingenuous young student (in-gigno-us, which means noble, but in the sense of being free to act, free subject) is called by Vico to turn “litararum studia” into an instrument of liberation from the shadow of the ocium. The heroic mind must get out of its hideout and cease to rejoice in its tranquility. There is a threshold that the subject must be aware when engaging in the enterprise of the literary studies. Vico continues:

[Translation]:

What you are expected to do is to unfold through studying what in your mind is heroic in order to turn your knowledge to the happiness of the humankind, [...] you see how what I ask you to do goes beyond the human nature, since I expect you to celebrate the divinity of your mind. Philosophers define the hero that who aspires to sublime things. There are two things that are more sublime then anything else and that are good and great: God above nature and, human happiness in nature; this nature in which there is nothing more marvelous and greater than man.\footnote{\textit{A vobis, inquam, est expectandum ut literarum studiis operam detis, qua vestram mentem explicetis heroicam et sapientiam ad generis humani felicitatem instituatis; [...] Videte quantum a vobis humana conditione maiora peto, ut postulem a vobis divinam prope vestrarum mentium celebrari naturam! Heros enim philosophis definitur qui sublimia appetit; sublimia autem iisdem ipsis sunt haec optima maxima: supra naturam Deus; in natura haec spectabilium rerum universitas, in qua neque quid maius est quam hominum genus, neque quid proinde melius quam generis humani felicitas} (Vico, \textit{De mente}, 372).}

Heroes are those who aspire to sublime things. The nature of this sublimity is twofold since it is made of a double tension: one toward a “supra” and one toward an “in.” The heroic gesture is both a celebration and a struggle. It is a celebration of the divine power of the mind of unfolding (explico) its heroism in nature, and a struggle for the achievement of what is beyond nature.

Ex-plicare, on a more grammatical level, signifies the operation of smoothing out, of flattening a folded surface. Vico seems to design a geometry of the heroic mind: along the vertical axis of “supra” and “in,” the mind unfolds itself as page, as a curve that tries to meet the axis of the sublime. The explicatio as unfolding happens however on the level of a surface, while the sublime tension of the mind drives the subject constantly upward and downward in search of the divine and of the human. Heroism can be seen as the intersection of a vertical line and the curvilinear shape of an unfolding movement.
In a sense Vico seems to inscribe into the text the sign of the Cartesian
coordinates. This heroic geometry, so to speak, it is neither plane not
tridimensional, but rather it is to be found in the tension between flattening and
verticalization. The space of the sublime is precisely below this threshold (sub-
limine): the limit of the vertical that cannot become horizontal and the other way
around?. The explicatio is heroic precisely for engaging in this challenge. The
unfolding of the mind is a stretching between the two opposites of the human
and of the divine, and the hero’s quest is a journey through this middle space.

The space in between is a land where the subject must familiarize himself
with what is diverse. The apprenticeship of the heroic mind must go through the
learning of several languages and disciplines, it must cross multiple perspectives
before unfolding itself. Vico’s “method,” in De mente heroica, is what we would
call today a comparative one. Students must literally cross the space of
knowledge as in a journey: “Thus you must permeate the three realms of the
human the natural and eternal things and with the knowledge of them celebrate
the almost divine nature of your mind.”

The subject can celebrate the divinity of its nature only after crossing and
pervading the realms of law, philosophy, natural sciences, which means the
worlds of institutions, morality and physics. In branching out toward several
disciplines, the subject discovers its heroism: like the hero of a novel, the subject
unfolds its identity through the discovery of a path among infinite possible ways.

62  Ita omnes humanarum, naturalium aeternarumque rerum tres mundos
permeate, et doctrina atque eruditione divinam ferme vestrarum mentium
celebrate naturam.
The destiny of the hero depends on his ability of bringing together what is most valuable, of filtering and sorting the gold from the sand:

During the time that you take classes you should not do anything else but constantly compare everything that you learn in order to create connections among them in order to make them cohesive. In this you will be helped by the very nature of the human mind that rejoices in uniformity, convenience, and decency. In fact, it is not a coincidence that the Latin word scientia has the same origin of scitus that means also beautiful: beauty is symmetry among all the parts of the body. Similarly science must be considered as the beauty of the human mind and when man are caught by this mental beauty they never look back at the physical beauty. 63

Conferre and permeare (compare and cross) are the key terms of the journey of the heroic mind. The act of comparing has the function of gathering in a homogeneous view what is diverse, according to the principle, stated by Vico also in the axiom XLVII of the New Science, that the mind “finds pleasure in what is homogeneous, convenient, and decorous” (Vico, New Science ’44, 88). The act of knowledge must somehow produce an aesthetic pleasure.

63 “Totum autem audiendi tempus nihil aliud agite quam conferre quae didiceritis, ut quaeque inter se constent et cuncta in quavis scientia consentiant; ad quod faciendum ipsa humanae mentis natura vos duxerit, quae uniformi, convenienti, decoro summopere delectatur, ut Latini sapienti vocabulo scientiam appellasse videantur ab eadem, unde dicitur scitus, origine, quod idem ac pulcher significat, quia, cum pulchritudo sit membrorum inter se omniumque in aliquo praestanti corpore iustus commensus, scientia nihil aliud existimari debet quam mentis humanae pulchritudo, qua homines semel capti formas corporum, vel maxime luculentas, ne advertunt quidem; tantum abest ut iis commoveantur” (Vico, De mente, 388)
Vico stresses the relationship between knowledge and aesthetic pleasure by using one of his “mythopoietic etymologies.” According to Vico, knowledge (scientia) shares the same root of scitus which means knowledgeable but also, gracious, decorous, beautiful. This etymology allows Vico to draw a comparison, thus enacting the practice of conferre, that is, of comparing knowledge and beauty (pulchritudo). Like beauty is harmony and proportions of parts, so knowledge is symmetry of different disciplines. Conferre and permeare allow the subject to discover the beauty of its mind.

Along with the discovery of the beauty of the mind, the subject discovers itself as point of intersection of opposite and complementary forces. Permeare and conferre are two movements somehow opposite. While crossing indicates a movement from point to point, compare (in the sense of gathering) expresses a circular gesture, the clustering of knowledge into borders which are successively expanded by a subsequent movement of crossing. In a sense, the heroic mind evolves into a spiral, a curvilinear movement that, once has reached a point, builds around it a sort of fence that retains all the power of that point. The pulchritudo of the mind lies in its ability to cluster the different fenced areas around the dots it has crossed, connecting the gray zones of their intersections. Knowledge, like beauty, is the result of a harmonic blend of different pieces. Beauty and unfolding of the mind go together. The heroic mind is the narrative

of this quest, of this continuos alternating of permeare and conferre, moving and gathering, crossing and encircling.

To the geometry of a hierarchical knowledge, Vico opposes a dynamic model in which the subject progresses through a constant revolving on both itself and the world around. The displacement of the center resembles, again, the shape of a Baroque serpentine line. The journey of the heroic mind is made of intertwined threads, multiple directions, curves, deviations. The subject becomes a textus, a point of intersection. The act of learning becomes an aesthetic gesture in the sense that it represents the quest of a secret harmony among different forms of knowledge. The tendency toward the two sublimes of man and god is the search for pulchritudo, of a serpentine line capable of connecting dots in a new and meaningful fashion:

Consider how much of the world of science still needs to be corrected, explored, and integrated. Do not let yourself be fooled by that envious saying according to which in this happy century we have perfected and refined all forms of knowledge. This is a false saying spread by worthless intellectuals: on the contrary the world is still young.\(^{65}\)

The constant regeneration of the world brings along an endless turning of what is considered absolute, exhausted, and perfect (absoluta, consummata, perfecta) into something that still has to be improved, completed, and discovered (corrigendum, supplendum, detegendum). The opposition between present and past participle renders, on a syntactical level, the idea of how the heroic mind

\(^{65}\) [...] considerate quantum scientiarum orbis restet adhuc corrigendum, supplendum, detegendum! Neque vero vos incautos iste sive invidus sive ignavus circumveniat rumor: hoc beatissimo seculo, quae in re literaria effecta dari unquam potuerant, iam omnia absoluta, consummata, perfecta esse, ut in ea nihil ultra desiderandum supersit, Falsus rumor est, qui a pusilli animi literatis differtur. Mundus enim iuvenescit adhuc. (Vico, De mente, 396)
must unfold, ex-plicare, turn knowledge into a narrative not yet written but that still has to be told. The perfect becomes perfectible, the absolute becomes subject to improvement, the complete becomes undiscovered.

Conferre, the act of comparing and gathering what is most valuable in every discipline, is a process of opening what only apparently seems closed and finished. The sublimity of the heroic mind consists of this ability of dismembering, disjointing, disrupting. The subject must be able to break in and tear apart the usual connections among the disciplines, positing itself as crucible of the threads of knowledge. The heroic mind’s sublimity is the power of finding a place in between what is no longer perfect and what is perfectible. The hero’s quest is thus somehow a search for a home that never finds its own definitive place.

The journey starts from the ocium of a knowledge that rests in the reassuring confines of given coordinates that make everything look sound, complete, and perfect. The first step is to break the hierarchical order of knowledge and to cross multiple disciplines according to a movement that is both progressive and encircling. The discovery of the nature of the heroic mind as crucible and as creator of crucibles is what is precisely sublime: the tension, the movement, the middle ground between what is no longer perfect and what is perfectible. This gray zone is where the heroic minds unfolds itself and discovers its sublime drive. De mente heroica can then be seen as the envisioning of a new philosophical subject. The second oration I want to take into account, De nostri
temporis studiorum ratione, can be read as the articulation of the modality through which the heroic mind accomplishes the unfolding of its sublimity.

2.3 The Subject of the New Science between Euclid and Daedalus

De mente heroica and De ratione are chapters of a same aesthetic education. Both orations describe a formative journey. After determining the heroic drive of the mind toward the discovery of the sublime, of what is “intra” and “supra,” we need to look at the modalities through which the mind can unfold its abilities. The De ratione provides directions on how enterprise in the humanistic studies on one hand, and it offers metaphorical representations of the metamorphosis that the subject is required to go through in order to unfold his mind on the other. My analysis will thus be focused on two images that underscore the oration: Euclid the geometrician and Daedalus the mythical architect of the labyrinth of Knossos.

I argue that the images of Euclid and Daedalus represent two modalities of reading that Vico advocates for both the formation of the humanistic subject in general, and the particular reader of the New Science who, as we have seen, must be able to deal with the serpentine nature of Vico’s philosophical discourse. My analysis aims at showing the epistemological implications of Vico’s metaphors on one hand, and their meta-literary meaning on the other, as images of the ideal reader of Vico’s philosophy. The oration begins with the assumption that “enimvero omne, quod homini scire datar, ut et ipse homo, finitum et imperfectum.” The adjective ‘imperfect’ signifies an open ended perfectibility of
the objects. Vico is looking for a trajectory. His oration is an attempt to provide students with a swift peek into every possible topic. The attention to the ideas of topos, locus, space are crucial in the definition of Vico’s discourse:

Modern philosophical critique supplies us with a fundamental verity of which we can be certain even when assailed by doubt. That critique could rout the skepticism even of the New Academy. In addition, ‘analysis’ (i.e., analytical geometry) empowers us to puzzle out with astonishing ease geometrical problems which the Ancients found impossible to solve. [...] Modern scientists seeking for guidance in their exploration of the dark pathways of nature, have introduced the geometrical method into physics. Holding to this method as to Ariadne’s thread, they can reach the end of their appointed journey. Do not consider them as groping practitioners of physics: they are to be viewed, instead, as the grand architects of this limitless fabric of the world: able to give a detailed account of the ensemble of principles according to which God has built in this admirable structure of the cosmos[...]. (Vico, Study Method, 9)  

There are two spatial images which are relevant to my argument. Through the reference to Arianna’s thread, Vico inscribes in the passage the image of the labyrinth with all the implications it brings along (Daedalus, Theseus, Icarus) on the one hand. Through the association of geometricians and architects Vico metaphorically translates geometry into an imaginary palace on the other. The two images are specular and complementary. Let’s first follow the general argument of the passage.

___________

66 “Etenim Critica id nobis dat primum verum, de quo, vel cum dubitas, certus fias; et quo omnem prorsus Academiam Novam profligasse existimatur. Analysis autem mira methodi facilitate problemata geometrica antiquis insoluta dissolvit. Et antiqui geometria et mechanica, tanquam Physicae Instrumentis usi sunt non perpetuo tamen: nostri iisdem et perpetuo, et melioribus. Nam geometriam analysis eipticatiorem, et mechanicam novanme, nostrae disputationis non est; novis certe et ingeniosissimis inventis auctam adhibent duces et, ne ab alis unquam in tenebricoso naturei itinere deserantur, methodum geometricam in Physicam importarunt, qua veluti Ariadneo aliquo filo alligati, institutum peragunt iter, et eaossas, quibus haec admirabilis mundi machina a Dee Opt. Max. constructa est, non jam tentabundi physici, sed velut immensi alicujus operis architectit describunt (Vico, De ratione, 98).”
After declaring in the first part that everything man can know is imperfect, Vico discusses how contemporary science has tried to make up for this deficiency. According to Vico, modern criticism has been increasingly assimilated to the geometrical analysis, and thus to the rigid structure of deduction. Vico’s argument addresses the problem of the application of the analysis to the entirety of the disciplines.

It is important to notice how the image of an extensive labyrinth (of nature) crossed through the help of an Arianna’s thread, along with the one of a majestic building, inscribe in the text a horizontal and vertical dimension as we saw happening in the De mente heroica. Furthermore, the explicit reference to a journey makes the map of geometry and the building of geometricians look like topoi of a hero’s journey. The palace is the home the hero leaves to embark in the journey through the world of knowledge on one hand, and the place he can safely go back to and call home on the other. The geometrical plain is a steady surface where everything has its own place, and everything is hierarchically defined. The two images however have a self reflexive function in the economy of Vico’s argument.

The image of the Arianna’s thread implies the entering, the exploring, and the exiting of a closed space. The palace is the centre from which the coordinates of knowledge branch out through the land of knowledge. The figures that geometry creates by joining dots on a plain surface, are the maps of the word the geometrician draws. In Vico’s description, this kind of geometrician uses figures as an Arianna’s thread to not get lost in the open space, without entering and
penetrating the surface on which he walks. In a sense, what Vico seems to say is that geometrician use a thread without in fact even trying to enter any labyrinth.

Vico’s subject of philosophy is instead a reader who does not need a reassuring Arianna’s thread; he is a a heroic mind able to “cut” that thread like Theseus cuts off the head of the Minotaur. The philosophical subject must accept the risk of getting lost and give up the reassuring guidance of any compass. Vico’s epistemology is the narrative of a new philosophical “I,” it is the unfolding of a textual experience, of a literary gesture.

The image of the labyrinth implied in the figure of Arianna’s thread calls to mind the figure of Daedalus, the creator of the maze. According to the myth, Daedalus is imprisoned by Minos in a tower with his son Icarus to prevent him from divulging the secret of the labyrinth. Daedalus is the ingenuous creator of two artificial waxed wings through which he attempts to escape the prison. Daedalus is the father that witnesses the death of his own by means of his own ingenuity (Icarus ventures too close to the sun and burns his wings). Metaphorically, Daedalus translates the image of a subject that through his ingenuity faces the risk of death. Vico refers to Daedalus in the New Science as the inventor of seamanship, the craftiest and most difficult of all the arts because it is meant to tame the most perilous element, that of water, the sea, he last to be civilized by man (in Vico’s gods genealogy Poseidon is the last of the deity to be born since the sea is the last of the elements to be dominated). Daedalus embodies a heroic ingenuous mind. Vico seems to point to a definition of the reader as a Daedalus who enters a maze without the safety of any Ariadne’s
thread and who accepts the risk of his loss. In this sense, the image of Daedalus is opposite to the one of the geometrician who thinks of himself as the architect of a magnificent building:

For this reason, modern physicians are like those who inherited a palace that doesn’t lack of anything in terms of beauty and comfort. Thus, what is left them to do is to just change places to the interior decorations or to renovate the style of the building according to the contemporary fashion. Scholars claim that such physics taught through the geometrical method, is nature itself, which we can see and contemplate around us every day. They thus claim that we should be grateful to those authors that came before us for freeing us of the burden of still studying nature since they left us this beautiful and comfortable palaces. In the case nature really behaves as they say, we should be grateful to them. However, if nature would work differently, and if only one of the rules regarding motion established by such scholars reveals to be incorrect, they should be careful to not take nature for granted, as if they were paying attention only to the roof of their palace neglecting its foundations. (De Ratione, 114)  

Geometricians behave like the heirs of a wonderful construction of which they ignore the foundations. They are concerned only with the roof, the exterior container. The inside is only a place where the geometricians take pleasure in moving objects, changing the disposition and the look of the interior without questioning the foundations. Vico claims that as long as physics seeks a demonstration of nature, no real truth can be discovered, since nature is a

67 “Itaque recentiores physici eorum similes esse videtur, quibus aedes a parentibus relictae sunt, ubi nihil at magnificentiam et usum desideretur, ut iss tantum amplam suppellectilem mutare loco, aut aliquo tenui opere ad seculi morem exornare reliquatur. At inquintum docti homines hanc eandem physucam, qua ipsi metodo docent, ipsam esse naturam: et quoque te ad universi contemplationem convertas, hanc physicam intueri. Quare gratias agandas authoribus putant, qui nos tanto negocio naturae ultra contemplandae liberarunt: et has aedes amplissimas instructissimasque reliquerunt. Quando ita se habere naturam necesse est, agant quam maximas: sed, ea aliter sit comparata, si una de motu regula falsa sit, ut ne dicam non unam tantum iam falsi comperta esse videant, etiam atque etiam videant, ne non tuto iam naturae securi agent: et dum aedium fastigia curant, fundamenta cum pericolo negligent.” (Translation mine).
creation of God. Demonstrating nature means to force the invisible into the visible, while what is hidden can be revealed only to God’s eyes as maker.

What appears to be true in light of a geometrical demonstration is, in fact, only likely (verosimilia). Only by gaining insight into the modalities of production of geometry, the subject can consider the palace of knowledge from the foundation and not from the roof. In other words, Vico seems to suggest that we look at geometry not as demonstrative tool, but as a craft, as poetic construction. Knowledge is a building which must always be constructed from its foundation, without simply building on top of what is already there. The likeliness of geometry derives from the act of building and rebuilding, from the doing and undoing of the language that necessarily seeks new forms and figures. In Vico’s argument, geometry, is likely as a rhetorical speech that must constantly reinvent its figures in order not to lose its persuasive and cogent power. When the discourse of human science becomes likely and not necessary, the subject must start looking at nature not as physician but as poet. In terms of likelihood then, knowledge becomes increasingly a matter of eloquence, of persuasion, of rhetorical construction:

eloquence does not address itself to the rational part of our nature, but almost entirely to our passions. The rational part in us may be taken captive by a new woven of purely intellectual reasonings, but the passional side of our nature can never be swayed and overcome unless this is done by more sensuous and materialistic means [corpulenta machina].

---

The subject capable of reinventing geometry is the subject capable of seeing nature itself as a “corpulenta machina,” as a physical rhetorical machine that can be understood through an imaginative language.

Only through the birth of a philosophical subject capable of reflecting on its own production of signs, it is possible to gain an aesthetic vision of the totality. The subject must become textus and producers of texts: a plot of lines crossing a space no longer flat as in the Euclidian geometry, but open like the sky perilously traveled by Daedalus and its maze. To Vico the only possible knowledge is a creative knowledge:

The human mind went through the same process of chemistry which unwillingly created a very useful art for man. Similarly the human curiosity in following the traces of a hidden truth of nature created two very useful sciences: arithmetic and geometry, from which came mechanics, the most useful of all the arts. Thus human knowledge originated from something lacking in our minds, from its being limited, for which the mind is outside all things and does not contain them. For this reason the mind does not create what it knows. The most certain sciences are those similar to the divine knowledge which are creative knowledges, where the truth and doing are the same thing. We may conclude that the criteria of truth is to have done the things we talk about. The criteria for the clear and distinct idea is not valid because when the mind knows itself it does not create itself and in not doing so it cannot know itself. Human knowledge is a work of abstraction and thus the
single sciences are less certain the more they try to penetrate the physical matter. 69

The more geometry approaches nature from the principle of self-evidence, the more it clashes against a bodily world that remains closed and unknown. Geometry must become or, better, return to its original status of corpulenta machina, of rhetorical body in order to penetrate the corpulenta materia (bodily world). Body of speech and body of nature must meet each other in the ingenuity of the subject.

Euclid and Daedalus are two sides of the same coin. In the De ratione, Vico argues that in ancient times “geometry was the logic of youths” (geometria ferme omnibus erat logica puerorum) and was not only one among other disciplines but, most importantly, it was taught in a complete different manner, according to the developing of nature: “[The ancient teachers] used to teach that discipline [geometry], which cannot be understood without a strong imaginative
attitude, following the example of doctors, who follow the directions that nature takes. Thus the students would get used to think rationally without forcing their nature, but according to the age and their ingenuity.” 70  Geometry must thus return to a status quo ante where the creation of forms, the joining of dots, the figuration of curves and lines, were a matter of imagination and not of scholarly writing. Corpulenta machina and corpulenta materia must become one body:

The geometric method prescribes to maintain the physics debates within concise sentences, as if they were geometrical demonstrations, without any decoration. Thus, today, modern physicist discuss in a very rigorous and concise way as to make every sentence be a strict consequence of the one that precedes. In so doing these physicist preclude the development in those who listen, of the most philosophical faculty, the one that allows men to make connections among things far apart and different from each other, which is also considered to be the principle of every elegant way of talking. Being acute and tenuous are two different things: what is tenuous is made of only one line, acuteness always counts two lines. Among the most acute things there is undoubtedly the metaphor, the most sophisticated of the decorations.71

Vico uses geometry here as source of a metaphorical speech: geometry becomes both the form and the content, so to speak, of the discourse. Vico undoes

\[70\] “nam medicos imitati, qui, quo natura vergit, incumbunt, scientiam iis, quae sine acre imagines comformandi vi haud recte percipi potest, tradebant; ut nulla vi natura facta, sed sensim, et placide pro aetatis ingenio consuefierent ration.” (Vico, De Ratione, 106). Translation mine.

geometry through geometry itself, by turning its plain figures into corpulent figures of speech. Let’s consider how the passage is constructed.

Vico builds again a chain of dualisms: thin/thick; geometrician/philosopher; similar/different. The argument is built around these three semantic knots. While the geometrician traces thin lines among dots in a space pursuing proportions and recognizable patterns, the philosopher seeks a more robust and thick line capable of holding together the dissimilar, what is apparently unrelated but that which becomes meaningful only as long as it is part of a poetic creation. Only by superseding the linearity of the Euclidean geometry the subject can enter the gray ground of metaphysics: a space in which the dots are not held firmly by thin lines, but are the vertexes of ever changing figures that in their folding and unfolding acquire the thickness of a body, of a construction in which the foundations are always called into question and no steady roof is ever put on the top to close the inside, as a lid on a pot. Vico turns acute triangle from a plain figure to a tridimensional cone which metaphorical pierces the flat surface of geometry. The heroic mind ventures into the open of the unexplored, of a reality that never finds a definite shape and that always looks as an attractive monstrum, an unpredictable harmony of dissimilarities that the poetic attitude of the subject brings together. The experience of the monstrum, of the hybrid, of the form in search of itself, is the outcome of the tension between the aspiration to the uniform, the equal and recognizable, and the tension toward the multiform, the diverse, and unfamiliar. To the thinness of the formal language of reason, the heroic mind tries to add a thicker and more
robust language made of audacious associations, of Daedalic labyrinths, and of visual bodies. Like Daedalus, Vico’s philosophical subject observes the light through the burning body of Icarus, his vision is always filtered by his own poetic creation As we read in the De antiquissima:

The luminosity of the metaphysical truth is like that of the light, which we would not be able to see if not through opaque objects. The metaphysical truth is luminous since it cannot be encircled by any boundary and it cannot be distinguished as an object. The truth of physics, on the contrary, are opaque and only through them we can observe the metaphysical truth.\textsuperscript{72}

The pure light would be invisible if it wasn’t obstructed by objects which mold the light as it passes around it by casting, this is implicit in the passage, a shadow. Whereas it is not possible to concludere the light in itself, the light, on the contrary, may concludere the objects and gain then an opaque sensible form. Vico’s ideal reader must both conferre and concludere, circumscribe and compare. In the act of bringing together the dissimilar and shaping the light through the intromission of opaque objects, the subject takes on the art of both a painter and a sculptor: he is a painter for drawing thick and robust connections among things, and a sculptor for carving the shadow of light through the medium of objects which filter and protect the eyes from the blinding light of the pure truth. The opaque body is the New Science itself: Vico’s writing is a complex body that casts shadows and lights and that is at the same time defined

\textsuperscript{72} Sed haec metaphysici veri claritas eadem est numero ac illa lucis, quam non nisi per opaca distinguimus: metaphysica enim vera illustria sunt, quia nullo fine concludi, nulla re formata distingui possunt: physica autem sunt opaca, quibus metaphysicarum rerum lucem distinguimus. (translation mine)
by the lights and shadows that the reader’s subjectivity is able to cast on it.
Writing and seeing must ideally become one.

Euclid and Daedalus are two different and yet interdependent modalities of reading that express the verbal and visual tensions of the New Science. Vico’s ideal reader is a subject able to dress the different masks of a labyrinthian ingenuity and a synthetic mind; to master both the geometric compass and the art of mazes. The tension toward the sublime of the heroic mind is expressed in this dualism. What is now left to discuss is what the experience of the sublime consists of; what the reader who went through the process of metamorphosis required by Vico is ultimately called to experience. The following and conclusive section is thus focused on the relationship between the formation of the ideal reader and the nature of the sublime.

2.4 The Heroic “Baroque” Reader and the Experience of the Sublime.
The self that reads the New Science must become an active subject mastering both the art of Euclid and of Daedalus, geometry and ingenuity. These are two asks, so to speak, that the reader must alternatively wear to deal with the serpentine nature of Vico’s writing. The ultimate experience that Vico promises his “reformed” reader is the experience of the sublime.

In the final section of this chapter I argue that Vico’s idea of the sublime is a textual experience. In the New Science the sublime is presented as the culminating moment of a process of metamorphosis which implies the acquisition of poetic skills by the reader. Only by mastering the art of conceit and
the unitary vision of geometry the subject can see what the New Science is about: the truth of the philosophical discourse depends on how much the reader is able to transcend the words and images of the text in an ideal communion with author’s ingenuous mind. Vico’s sublime turns the experience of philosophy into a literary journey of which the subject becomes the hero.

First, I analyze the development of the metaphor of the dress in the New Science as a self-reflexive image of the formation of Vico’s ideal reader and, second, I illustrate how this metaphor reflects the very idea of sublime that Vico sets forth in his text. In conclusion, I will show how this process of metamorphosis of the subject into an ideal reader can be intended as threshold between Baroque aesthetics and Pre-Romanticism.

That of the dress is a crucial self reflexive image that translates a general tendency to a meta-criticism that Vico shows since the first edition of the New Science.. In the 1725 edition, in the fifth and final chapter, Vico writes:

But, after a continuous and severe meditation that has occupied us for twenty-five years, we finally discovered the principle that is as fundamental to this Science as the alphabet is to grammar and geometrical shape to geometry. For, just as the letter ‘a’, for example, is a grammatical character invented to provide uniformity for the infinite number of different vocal sounds [of the same kind] that we articulate as grave or acute, or, to provide an example of the other type, the triangle is a geometrical character designed to provide uniformity for the innumerable figures of angles of different size formed by the juncture of three lines at
three points, so the poetic characters are found to have been the elements of the languages in which the first gentile nations spoke.\footnote{“Dopo venticinque anni ormai che corrono di una continova ed aspra meditazione, si è ritrovato finalmente ciò che tal primo principio è di questa Scienza, quale l’abici è il principio della gramatica, quali le forme geometriche sono il principio della geometria. Perché siccome la lettera ‘a’ per esempio è un carattere dalla gramatica ritrovato per uniformarvi tutti gli infiniti diversi o gravi o acuti suoni vocalicosi articolati; il triangolo per cagion di altro esempio, è un carattere disegnato dalla geometria per uniformarvi tutte le innumerabili diverse figure in grandezza di tre angoli che si aguzzano da tre linee unite in tre punti: così si sono ritrovati essere i caratteri poetici stati gli elementi delle lingue con le quali parlarono le prime nazioni gentili.(Vico, \textit{First New Science}, 154).”}

I want to stress how in conclusion of his first version of the New Science, Vico draws a comparison between the principle discovered by him and the signs of writing on one hand, and those of geometry on the other. Vico places his own Science between writing and seeing. His text purposively presents itself as account of the poetic characters which determined the development of language and thus of cognition. It is important to notice how in this context the signs of grammar and of geometry become figures through which Vico reflects upon the identity of his own text. From 1725 to 1744, an increasing self-awareness of the New Science as text, as poetic construction, as narrative of poetic characters is expressed. In the 1725 edition, criticizing the authors that before him had discussed the origin of the universal history of nations, Vico writes:

Their second error is that the authorities with which each supports his system, [...] provide neither science nor necessity with regard to the origins, at least, of the historical era, origins which, in all nations, because of their barbaric nature, are heavily cloaked in fable, though this is even more true of the fabulous era of the nations and, most of all, of their obscure era. For they failed to consider how, on the occasion of certain human necessities or utilities and in certain modes, each arising in its own
proper time, Providence ordained this universal republic of mankind according to the idea of its eternal order (Vico, First new Science, 16-17).\textsuperscript{74}

Vico states that philosophers have so far disregarded the costumes (vestito) and shapes (guise) of the most ancient times of history, missing the connection that these same costumes and shapes create between obscurity of the past and eternal order of God. In other words, Vico’s New Science presents itself as medium between two unrepresentable polarities: the absolute truth and the obscurity of ancient times. Vico’s epistemological concerns regarding his own writing revolve around some crucial metaphors and recurring images. Among these, it is worth mentioning the metaphor of the dressing and undressing since it reflects the process of metamorphosis required by Vico from the reader to understand the object of the New Science. In a sense, the reader must metaphorically change clothes according to the different shapes forms that cloak the origin of nations. The clothes that the reader must alternatively wear are those of Euclid and Daedalus: the masks of a precise geometrician and that of an ingenuous architect of fantastic mazes.

In the 1725 edition the two images are quite strong and are bestowed with a deep epistemological meaning. In chapter XI of the first book, Vico writes that due to the obscurity of the ancient fables and myths:

\textsuperscript{74} “L’altro errore è che le autorità con le quali ciascuno conferma il suo […] elleno almeno circa i principî del tempo istorico, che, per la barbarie, appo tutte le nazioni è troppo vestito di favole: molto piú quelle del tempo favoloso, e sopra tutto quello del tempo oscuro, non portatno seco alcuna scienza e necessità. Perché essi non meditarono, nella provvidenza divina, a quali occasioni di umane necessitá o utilitá o con quali guise, e tutte coi tempi loro propri, ordinó questa universal repubblica del genero umano sopra l’idea del suo ordine eterno. (Vico, Scienza Nuova ’25, 989)”
it is essential that anyone who wishes to profit from this Science should reduce himself to such a state, in order that, in meditating upon it, he should neither be confused nor distracted by preconceptions long held in common. For all these doubts combined can in no way cast doubt upon this unique truth, which must be the first in such a science, since, in this long, dense night of darkness, this one light alone gleams forth: that the world of gentile nations was certainly made by men. Hence, in this vast ocean of doubt, there appears this one isle upon which we may stand firm: that the principles of this world must be discovered within the nature of our human mind (Vico, First New Science, 30).75

Passages like the one just quoted have the function of showing the epistemological premises of the text while the text is at work. To use an image previously discussed, this is how Vico builds his palace of knowledge always questioning the very nature of its foundations. We see again at work a binary structure: light/darkness; land/sea. The images have a self-reflexive value with regard to the New Science itself. The truth of the verum ipsum factum is the light in the darkness of the mystery of the origins. The truth of the origin lies in the man’s power of creating its own history. Investigating the history of man is then assimilated by Vico to a small land in the middle of a perilous ocean. Like Daedalus, inventor of seamanship, Vico builds an ingenuous metonymic chain of images where light is to land as darkness is to water. This metamorphosis of figures testifies the struggle for representation of the self who, faced with the

75 “[…] dobbiamo vestire per alquanto, non senza una violentissima forza, una sí fatta natura, e in conseguenza, ridurci in uno stato di somma ignoranza di tutta l’umana e divina erudizione, come se per questa richiesta non vi fussero mai stati per noi né filosofi né filologi. […] tutte queste dubiezze, insieme unite, non ci possono in niun conto porre in dubbio questa veritá, la qule dee essere la prima di sí fatta Scienza, poiché in cotal lunga e densa notte di tenebra quest’una sola luce barluma: che ’l mondo delle gentili nazioni egli è stato pur certamente fatto dagli uomini. In conseguenza della quale, per si immenso oceano di dubiezze, appare questa sola picciola terra dove si possa fermare il piede: che i di lui principi si debbono ritruovare dentro la natura della nostra mente umana […]. (Vico, Scienza Nuova ‘25, 1000)”
uncertainty of the ancients account of the origins, is forced to build chain of images in order to get hold of its own object. At the same time, this building is the object itself of the New Science: if the truth is in the working of the mind, the construction of images, so to speak, is both its form and its content. This process of self-reflection undergoes itself a constant reworking. In the 1730 edition the image of dressing undergoes a significative change. At the end of the section “Idea dell’Opera,” Vico writes:

Let's end with a few suggestions for any young man who wants to benefit from this Science. One: this Science is a metaphysical work and in its idea is abstract. For this reason you need to take off the clothes of any physicality and of everything that comes from such physicality. You must put your fantasy and memory to sleep because if these two faculties are awake the human mind cannot reduce itself to that state of pure understanding, formless of any particular form. For this reason you will not be able to find a form for this science and it would be only your fault if you will not understand it. Two: this Science proceeds following a strict geometrical method and moves from what is true to what is immediately true. For this reason you need to have the habit of thinking geometrically, thus, do not read this book jumping from a place to another, but read it from beginning to end. You must wait for all the premises to become true and well organized and do not wonder if all the conclusions will be wonderful, as it often happens in geometry, where, or example, two lines that infinitely get closer will never touch each other. The premises come
from an abstract reasoning and the conclusions will be affected by the fantasy.76

The modification of the metaphors must be intended as development of a textual praxis that posits figures of speech and images as epistemological foundations of the philosophical discourse. The image of dressing and undressing is symptomatic of an epistemological concern which has to do with the role of the reader within the mechanism of the New Science. The warning “don’t be surprised” requires the subject to see an underscoring design which the appearance of the linguistic structure may obscure. Vico asks the reader to undress the clothes of the imagination to be able to see a form without any particular form. The reader is warned about the risk to see too much in the text, up to the point of not being capable of seeing what really matters. Whereas in 1725 the reader is called to imagine, not without violence, the primordial nature of men without any formal language, in 1730 that same reader is invited to put

76 “Conchiudiamo finalmente con questi pochi seguenti avvisi, per alcun Giovine, che voglia profitare di questa scienza. 1) Primieramente ella fa il suo lavoro tutto metafisico, ed astratto nella sua Idea: onde ti è bisogno nel leggerla di spogliarti d’ogni corpolenza, e di tutto ciò, che da quella nostra pura mente proviene, e quindi per un poco addormentare la fantasia, e sopir la memoria: perché se queste facultá vi son desti, la mente non può ridursi in istato d’un puro intendimento, informe d’ogni forma particolare; per lo ché non potravvi affatto indurvisi la forma di questa Scienza; e per tua colpa darai in quell’uscita, che non s’intenda. 2) Ella ragiona con uno stretto metodo geometrico, con cui da vero passa ad immediato vero, e così vi fa le sue conchiusioni. Laonde ti è bisogno di aver fatto l’abito del ragionar geometricamente; e perció non aprire a sorte questi libri, per leggerli, né per salti, ma continvarne la lezione da capo a piedi. E dei attendere se le premesse siano vere, e ben’ ordinate; e non meravigliarti, se quasi tutte le conchiusoni n’escano meravigliose: lo che sovente avviene in essa Geometria, come quella per esempio delle due linee, che tra loro in infinito sempre s’accostano, e non mai si toccano; perché la conseguenza è turbata dalla fantasia; ma le premesse s’attennero alla pura ragion astratta (Vico, Scienza Nuova ‘30, 58).” Translation mine.
its own imagination to sleep in order to see the general form of the discourse without being blinded by a too violent imagination. A fervid imagination would have the effect of multiplying the number of forms and thus of clouding the one universal form that the text wants to represent. If it is true that pure signs are abstract, pure vision is also misleading if it loses touch with the materiality of the language. The New Science is a gray zone, an opaque body. The change of metaphors reflects the building of knowledge as textual praxis.

Interestingly, the entire metaphor of the dressing and undressing is totally ruled out in the 1744 edition. Vico seems unable to find any dress adequate to properly introduce the subject to the obscure matter of the New Science. In a sense, such dress must be tailored over and over and folded according to the ever changing cuts and styles. The fashioning of knowledge is to Vico an aesthetic act, as we can deduce from Vico’s description of geometry in the 1744 edition of the New Science

Thus our Science proceeds exactly as geometry does which, while it constructs out of its elements or contemplates the world of quantity, itself creates it; but with a reality greater in proportion to that of the orders having to do with human affairs, in which there are neither points, lines, surfaces, nor figures. And this very fact is an argument, O reader, that these proofs are of a kind divine, and should give thee a divine pleasure; since in God knowledge and creation are one and the same thing. (Vico, New Science ’44, 93)\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{77} Così questa Scienza procede appunto come la geometria, che, mentre sopra i suoi elementi il costruisce o ’l contempla, essa stessa si faccia il mondo delle grandezze; ma con tanto più di realtà quanta più ne hanno gli ordini d'intorno alle faccende degli uomini, che non ne hanno punti, linee, superficie e figure. E questo istesso è argomento che tali pruove sieno d'une specie divina e che debbano, o leggitore, arrecarti un divin piacere, perocché in Dio il conoscere e ’l fare è una medesima cosa.
The New Science proceeds like geometry as it creates its own foundations, on top of which it builds its own palace. To Vico, the experience of this building of the text, of its layering up over principles and slowly reaching its conclusion is, per se, a divine proof of the truthfulness of the text. The aesthetic perception of the structure of the text, of its making, helps the reader to become himself a creator, a divine point in which knowing and making merge. To remain within the limits of the image of the dress, we could claim that the subject must wear the clothes of an architect of the imaginary palaces able to always call into question the origin itself of its building, its very foundations. Again, the self must become a sort of Daedalus.

The New Science is a literary narrative organized as a formless maze, as a labyrinth that has a hidden plan and structure which becomes visible only in unspeakable and visionary moments. The very epistemological foundations of Vico’s writing relies on the subject’s ability of developing a new way of seeing: seeing the writing as an architectural construction and himself as both the dweller and the designer of that construction. In both the 1730 and 1744 edition, with some slight differences, Vico clearly states:

In the deplorable obscurity of the beginnings of the nations and in the innumerable variety of their customs, for a divine argument which embraces all human things, no sublimer proofs can be desired than those provided by the aforesaid naturalness, order and end (the preservation of the human race). These proofs will become luminous and distinct when we reflect with what ease things are brought into being, by occasions arising far apart and sometimes quite contrary to the proposals of men, yet fitting together of themselves. Such proofs omnipotence affords. Compare the things with one another and observe the order by which those are now born in their proper times and places which ought now to
be born, and others deferred for birth in theirs (and all the beauty of order, according to Horace, consists in this). Such proofs eternal wisdom provides. Consider, finally, if in these occasions, places and times we can conceive how other divine benefits could arise by which, in view of the particular needs and ills of men, human society could be better conducted or preserved. Such proofs the eternal goodness of God will give. Thus the proper and consecutive proof here adduced will consist in comparing and reflecting whether our human mind, in the series of possibilities it is permitted to understand, and so far as it is permitted to do so, can conceive more or fewer or different causes than those from which issue the effects of this civil world. In doing this the reader will experience in his mortal body a divine pleasure as he contemplates in the divine ideas this world of nations in all the extent of its places, times and varieties. (Vico, New Science ’44, 122)

In this passage Vico defines the experience of the New Science as an aesthetic gesture. Through the reflection and combination of the different parts of the text, the reader will develop the awareness that nothing could have been done

---

78 Per tutto ciò, nella deplorata oscurità de' principi e nell'innumerable varietà de' costumi delle nazioni, sopra un argomento divino che contiene tutte le cose umane, qui pruove non si possono più sublimi disiderare che queste istesse che ci daranno la naturalezza, l'ordine e 'l fine, ch'è essa conservazione del gener umano. Le quali pruove vi riusciranno luminose e distinte, ove rifletteremo con quanta facilità le cose nascono ed a quali occasioni, che spesso da lontanissime parti, e talvolta tutte contrarie ai proponimenti degli uomini, vengono e vi si adagiano da se stesse; e tali pruove ne somministra l'onnipotenza. Combinarle e vederne l'ordine, a quali tempi e luoghi loro propi nascono le cose ora, che vi debbono nascer ora, e l'altre si differiscono nascer ne' tempi e ne' luoghi loro, nello che, all'avviso d'Orazio, consiste tutta la bellezza dell'ordine; e tali pruove ci apparecchia l'eterna sapienza. E finalmente considerare se siam capaci d'intendere se, a quelle occasioni, luoghi e tempi, potevano nascere altri benefici divini, co' quali, in tali o tali bisogni o malori degli uomini, si poteva condurre meglio a bene e conservare l'umana società; e tali pruove ne darà l'eterna bontà di Dio. Onde la propia continua pruova che qui farassi sarà il combinar e riflettere se la nostra mente umana, nella serie de' possibili la quale ci è permesso d'intendere, e per quanto ce n'è permesso, possa pensare o più o meno o altre cagioni di quelle ond'escono gli effetti di questo mondo civile. Lo che facendo, il leggitore pruoverà un divin piacere, in questo corpo mortale, di contemplare nelle divine idee questo mondo di nazioni per tutta la distesa de' loro luoghi, tempi e varietà. (Vico, Scienza Nuova ’44, 550)
differently, that everything fits perfectly into a necessary picture. The sense of a perfect combination is what ultimately represents the achievement of sublimity.

The sublime is unfolded in the act of reading. The subject, through the creations of Daedalic conceits and plain Euclidean figures, become able to elevate himself (sub-limes) beyond the materiality of the words and images of the philosophical discourse. Ultimately, the ecstatic experience of the sublime is a moment of convergence of both the author’s and the reader’s imagination. The sublime in Vico is thus a meeting point between creative minds: like in a Baroque conceit, the subject, whether a viewer or a reader, becomes the creator himself, and the mystery of creation is revealed in an enraptured moment of aesthetic pleasure: a pleasure that still implies a surrender of the logic as we normally intend it; a pleasure which remains indescribable and only knowable through a bodily experience, through a feeling of overwhelming that nevertheless makes everything look clear, necessary, indisputable. Yet, the pleasure of this aesthetic conversion, so to speak, is somehow incomplete. The subject will perceive the perfection of the combination, and thus the presence of a divine design behind, only if the subject is able, “as much as possible,” to compare this necessity to any other possible way things could have been. The limit of imagination represents here the assurance that the combination the mind produces, the ecstatic and aesthetic pleasure of its entanglement, will provoke a divine and revealing pleasure. At the utmost expression of the aesthetic and poetic tension of the New Science, Vico acknowledges its very limits.
What is crucial is that this limit is what makes possible to perceive the divine pleasure. The fact that the subject, because of the extent of its mind, is not capable of thinking of any other possible way for the things to be, is what makes this order the only possible order. The necessity, so to speak, is obtained in part by privation, by negation. The pleasure derives from the double tension of combining and contemplating one the one hand, and of remitting the imagination on the other. Moving from the obscurity of the origin through the text, the reader should finally get to see the necessity of the world as unfolded on a surface. Where the imagination reaches its limit, there it is to be found the sublime proof of the metaphysical truth. The identity of knowing and making is experienced in a gray zone where the abstract contemplation and the concrete vision seem to meet. This zone is also the space in which the limits of both are revealed. The New Science is the narrative of the discovery of this limit, of the unveiling of the sublime truth as representation of a limit. The complex mechanism of the dipintura and of the explanation which I analyzed in the first part of this chapter must be seen as representation of this threshold: as I have shown words and images in Vico’s opening chapter are not in a transitive relationship, but rather they seem to chase each other in order to achieve a totality of meaning. In this regard, David L. Marshall argues that Vico’s rhetoric is a sublimated language since it disguises its true representative tension behind the surface of a classicist poetics. The sublime is also considered by Marshall part of this work of sublimation: it is first “scholastically” accepted in its traditional forms and then reinvented in a new and more subtle praxis of writing as
“epistemic rhetoric.” What however Marshall doesn’t remark in his study, is that the sublimation of the sublime implies a profound shift in the philosophical understanding of the sublime. By associating the sublime with the ultimate truth of the metaphysics, Vico brings rhetoric into aesthetics. The form of representation and the object of truth become indissolubly united. The place where the vision of the hidden order of history happens, is the gray zone of the heroic language: a language able to read between the folds of the discourse, to see beyond the literal meaning of words, and to recreate the process of creation of the philosophical text itself.

The sublime becomes the form of the formless, where the truth is revealed by a perfect identification of the reader’s and the author’s minds: a moment of suspension where the elevation above the materiality of words and images coincides with a deep, almost physical as Vico suggests, penetration inside the text. The subject elevates by entering inside, it soars by digging into the text: an oxymoronic gesture that exemplifies the subject’s power of reading, of poetically find his path in the tangles of words and images, serpentine lines, reversals, figures of speech. The act of reading accomplishes the full unfolding of the mind’s tension toward the sublime. In a famous passage of the De antiquissima Italiorum sapientiae Vico was already somehow pointing at the definition of a new philosophical subject intended as an ingenuous reader. We read:

> To know means put together the elements of things in such a way that as thinking is proper of the human mind, Intelligence is proper of the divine mind. This is because God reads both the external and internal elements

---

of things since He contains and organizes them; while the human mind, being limited, and without containing but itself it can go beyond the surface of things and it never manages to put them all together. The human mind can certainly think about things but it cannot really understand it: it is rational but it does not own the things.  

In the De ratione Vico defines human knowledge as an act of col-ligere, gather together. The divine knowledge is in contrast defined as a legere, an act of reading. I would suggest that Vico’s ideal reader is the one able to move from colligere to legere, from a collection of pieces to the the vision of the totality. The opposition legere/colligere (which shame the same root “lego”) is not circumstantial but it expresses the metamorphosis of a philosophical subject that through his ingenuous reading is able to see everything from the inside and outside at the same time. The experience of the sublime marks the threshold between the legere and colligere and it allows the progress from the latter to the former.

Vico’s constant self-reflection on the making of the New Science and his complex web of images is a strategy to slowly make the subject aware of his role of poetic agent in the accomplishment of the meaning of the text, in the achievement of the metaphysical truth by a sublime experience. It is this process of self-representation of the subject and of his textual metamorphosis, that, in my view, makes Vico a sort of a “nineteenth century in germ,” to use Croce’s

80 “Scire autem sit rerum elementa componere: unde mentis humanae cogitatio, divinae autem intelligentia sit propria; quod Deus omnia elementa rerum legit, cum extima, tum intima, quia continet et disponit: mens autem humana, quia terminata est, et extra res ceteras omnes, quae ipsa non sunt, rerum duntaxat extrema coactum eat, nunquam omnia colligat, ita ut de rebus cogitare quidem possit, intelligere autem non possit: quare particeps sit rationis, non compos.

expression. It is perhaps Croce himself who gave us the most articulated and vivid description of the reading of the New Science. In The philosophy of Giambattista Vico, Croce appears as Vico’s ideal reader, as an ingenuous subject able to see the constant folding and unfolding of the text in always different directions. He writes:

Light and shade, truth and error, which alternate and interweave at almost every point in the New Science, are variously distinguished according to the various temperaments of readers and critics: and in conspicuous cases, like that of Vico, such variations assume the most sharply denned form. Some minds are self-willed and suspicious, quick to mark any trifling contradiction, merciless in demanding proof of every statement, and indefatigable in wielding the forceps of dilemma to dismember an unfortunate great man. For them Vico’s work, like many others of the same kind, is a closed book. At most, it will provide them with a theme for what is known as a “refutation”: an easy and congenial task, yet hardly a successful one, since the man they have demolished generally emerges from the slaughter more alive than before. But there is another type of mind, which, at the first word which reaches the heart, at the first ray of truth which dawns upon the eyes, opens its whole self in desire, abandons itself in faith, and grows wild with enthusiasm; which refuses to hear of faults and never sees difficulties, or the difficulties at once vanish, and the faults find the easiest of justifications: and when it commits itself to writing, its writings appear in the guise of “defenses.” For such a mind we fear that the New Science is a book all too open. […] a third attitude is possible to, and indeed incumbent on the critic; namely, that which never takes its eyes off the light, but yet does not conceal the shade; which transcends the letter to attain the spirit, yet not ignoring the letter, but always returning to it, always endeavoring to play the part of a free but not a fanciful interpreter, a warm lover but not a blind one.81

Croce points the finger at the very essence of the reading experience of the New Science, yet not without an ambiguous antithesis. The intertwining of lights and shades, of literal and metaphorical meanings, can affect the readers’ consciousnesses in opposite ways. The book can be closed or too open: why does

---

Croce use the adverb too only in one case? Couldn’t the book also be too closed? Vico’s New Science is such a corpulent rhetorical machine that opens perspectives and windows on landscapes hardly imaginable for the subject, and for which Vico himself has no adequate expression, as we have seen for example in the development of the metaphor of the dress. The danger, after all, comes from a too open space in which it is easy to get lost: a closed space can be frustrating but yet more reassuring. The “third” way imagined by Croce, the one that goes beyond the letter but that always returns to it, is precisely the path that the heroic mind should follow, constantly folding and unfolding Vico’s work as an opaque body that always reflects different lights, and that by different lights and shadows is always differently sculptured. This threshold between a too open and a closed space is the horizon where the philosophical subject dwells, and where images become meaningful without words and words meaningful without speaking.

From the serpentine line of the dipintura to the experience of the sublime, we observe the evolving of a subject that progressively learn to make his way through the complex conceits, hybrid constructions, that build the philosophical text. Vico turns the Baroque sense of wonder and the theory of the conceit into the basis for the experience of the sublime. The serpentine line, Daedalus, and Euclid are the three figures of a metamorphosis of Vico’s subject of philosophy who becomes, first of all, a reader, an ingenuous “I” able to read and create conceits. Vico’s philosophy builds a dense web of images that requires the reader to poetically read the text, connecting images displaced in different works and in
the different versions of the New Science. The ingenuity needed for such operation becomes the basis for the ecstatic experience of the metaphysical truth. The subject must reproduce the very dynamic of the creation of the text in order to understand it, thus bridging the distance between reader and author on one hand, and reader and text on the other. The sublime revelation of truth is the moment where reader’s and author’s ingenuity meet, accomplishing a higher level of intellectual communication.

In the following chapter I propose a reading of the Romantic idea of sublime as the development of this dialectic between ingenuity and aesthetic intuition through the analysis of Novalis’ novel Heinrich Von Ofterdingen. I will read the sublime not in its philosophical definition but as poetic praxis, as textual strategy of representation. From this perspective, the Romantic sublime is considered as the reworking of rhetorical structures rooted in the theory of conceit and allegory and as representation of subjectivity as an ingenuous reader and active agent in the process of signification of the literary text.
3. NOVALIS AND THE SUBLIME AS A READING EXPERIENCE

And though I believe that with these words I have delineated the nature and office of poetry as clearly as I can, all the same I know that no one can understand it, and what I have said is quite foolish because I wanted to say it, and that is no way for poetry to come about. But what if I were compelled to speak? What if this urge to speak were the mark of the inspiration of language, the working of language within me? And my will only wanted to do what I had to do? Could this in the end, without my knowing or believing, be poetry? Could it make a mystery comprehensible to language? If so, would I be a writer by vocation, for after all, a writer is only someone inspired by language?

Novalis

In the previous chapter I argued that Vico’s New Science represents the first seminal attempt to turn the philosophical discourse into a poetic narrative that requires the definition of a new philosophical subject intended as an ideal reader. This reader is an “I” capable of poetically connecting different figures of speech in the text and, by exercising his own ingenuity and imagination, to become the active producer of a philosophical speech. The truth manifests itself in the intersection of the space of the author’s ingenuity and that of the reader. I argued that this space is created by turning the Baroque conceit into a modality of reading. Rather than simply formulating an aesthetic theory on the origin of language and of the nations, Vico constructs his own philosophy as an aesthetic experience by creating a dense web of intertextual images that reflects the making itself of the philosophical discourse. By creating a kaleidoscopic rhetoric made of reflections and refractions of images into one and other, Vico clears a textual space for the birth of a new model of a reader able to understand the indissolubility of truth and poetic ingenuity. The truth of the philosophical discourse is indistinguishable from its textual construction. In a sense, to use an
oxymoron, it can be argued that Vico’s reader is a poetic “I” capable of seeing a logical pattern without logic, a sort of a-logical (in its etymological sense of speechless) logic. Vico describes this aesthetic/textual experience, made possible by the ingenuity of the conceits, as a sublime moment.

The sublime is the result of the idiosyncrasy between the immediacy of the experience and artificiality of the language; between perception and discourse. In the gap between the two, the subject, as a reader, is able to see the necessity of the discourse without however being able to account for all its logical connections. Vico turns the philosophical discourse into a complex poetic construction that requires the subject to read the text according to poetic, emotional, and intuitive dynamics. The truth is expressed through a Baroque sense of marvel and the perception of a higher poetic order of the real for which there is no definite representation, but only the constant approximation of an ever-changing rhetoric. Vico’s ideal trajectory from the Baroque conceit to the experience of the sublime allows us to read the formation of the Romantic rhetoric in terms of continuity with the aesthetic problems of the 17th century.

In this chapter I analyze Novalis’ novel Heinrich Von Ofterdingen as the reworking of the Baroque conflict between allegorical authority and poetic ingenuity. In my reading I argue that Novalis builds his text according to a rhetorical structure which leads the subject to constantly create ingenuous connections amongst the parts of the discourse, and to ultimately attain a vision of the text as a sublime moment of self-awareness of the subject’s poetic ingenuity. The sublime becomes a textual experience aimed at revealing the
poetic nature of the subject that is progressively unfolded by the act of reading itself.

I read the novel in light of Novalis’ theory of the hieroglyph that I consider as the reworking of the Baroque theory of conceit. The hieroglyph represents the midpoint between writing and abstraction. Novalis uses the iconographic structure of the hieroglyph as a rhetorical device that constantly deludes the reader’s expectations by promising an allegorical meaning that is instead delayed, and displaced in images connected by both a metaphorical and metonymic continuity. The rhetorical structure of the novel is based on the multiplication and repetition of linguistic and visual signs that constantly approximate a goal without ever reaching it.

My focus is on the rhetorical solutions used by Novalis in the construction of his novel to depict the journey of aesthetic education of the new modern reader. Before moving to the analysis of the novel, I need to briefly clarify how, and in what particular form, the problem of the sublime enters Novalis’ poetic and philosophical discourse. Heinrich Von Ofterdingen is written around 1799, that means a few years after the publication of Kant’s Critique of Judgment (1790).

As a matter of fact, Kant’s famous definition of the sublime as a “negative pleasure” deriving from a “feeling of deprivation of the power of imagination by itself” as the recognition of the limits of expression, can be seen as a rhetorical statement. What escapes the imagination generates a sense of astonishment “bordering on terror” for the incapacity of comprehending (in the sense of
containing within the mind) what appears endless and apparently limitless. Yet, this feeling of sublime is regarded as an act of the imagination itself, being an “attempt to involve ourselves in it [the endless] by means of the imagination.” In other words, according to Kant, the feeling of overwhelmingness that characterizes the sublime is caused by a lack of imagination and at the same time by the awareness that this very feeling is already a working of the imagination itself. This tension is rhetorical as well as theoretical. By trying to comprehend what the imagination can not, the subject is in fact already setting his imagination into motion: what defines the experience of the sublime is thus the awareness of both a void and of the strive to fill that very void. This ambivalence implies a process of signification that constantly presents its very limits and, like a Baroque conceit, does not hide its nature of artificial poetic production. Already in the Critique of Pure Reason Kant had described this process in the following terms:

The present world discloses to us such an immeasurable showplace of manifoldness, order, purposiveness, and beauty, whether one pursues these in the Infinity of space or in the unlimited division of it that in accordance with even the knowledge about it that our weak understanding can acquire, all speech concerning so many and such unfathomable wonders must lose its power to express, all numbers their power to measure, and even our thoughts lack boundaries, so that

_________________________


83 Derrida writes: “The inadequation of presentation is presented. As inadequation, it does not belong to the natural sensible order, nor to nature in general, but to the mind, which contents itself with using nature to give us a feeling of a finality independent of nature. Unlike that of the beautiful, the principle of the sublime must therefore be sought in ourselves who project the sublime into nature, ourselves as rational being.” Jacques Derrida. The truth in painting. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987 pp. 132
our judgment upon the whole must resolve itself into a speechless, but nonetheless eloquent, astonishment.84

The coexistence of a “speechless judgment” (sprachlos Urteil) and an “eloquent astonishment” represents a rhetorical conundrum,85 a paradox that in fact translates the very nature of the word itself sublime.

The German word for sublime, Das Herabene, indicates primarily a movement of ascension, an elevation. This meaning is derived from the Latin sublimis, which translates the Greek ἡψος, meaning greatness, magnificence.

What is the figurative process that brings greatness to signify elevation? The word itself contains a story of translation and of sublimation. Sublime is literally what is under (sub-) the architrave (limes), intended as a threshold, door, and gate. Sublime indicates something right under the higher point of an entrance. By metonymic association, the point right after the architrave, the higher part of the door, came to signify what is elevated. What is seen from below, that is under the highest point, starts to metaphorically symbolize what is most elevated. Sublime summarizes a position both below and above a threshold and also a rhetorical union of different figures of speech that cause the transformation of the word’s


85 As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write: “In this context, and crudely translated, this means that Kant opens up the possibility of romanticism. [...] In reality, an abyss opens up where a bridge should have been built and, if some connections are woven between art and philosophy, for example they also appear in the paradoxical figure of disconnection [déliaison] or, as Heidegger would say, of absolution.” P. Lacoue-Labarthe and J.-L. Nancy. *The literary absolute: the theory of literature in German romanticism* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988 pp. 29-30
meaning. The sublime implies different angles, different perspectives; it is a complex relationship between what is seen and what is understood, between imagination and perception. Kant is aware that the sublime, as theory and experience, entails a problem of presentation. The sublime is a moment of recognition of a limit of the imagination but also of the power of the same imagination to conceive the existence of a limit and thus to think of a totality beyond itself. Toward the end of the Critique of Judgment, Kant states that there are only two possible forms of presentation of an object schematic and symbolic: one based on logical pattern and one on empiric similarities with the object.

 [...] the symbolic is merely a species of the intuitive. The latter, namely (the intuitive), can be divided into the schematic and the symbolic kinds of representation. Both are hypotyposes, i.e., presentations (exhibitiones): a not mere characterizations, i.e., designs of the concepts by means of accompanying sensible signs, which contain nothing at all belonging to the intuition of the object, but only serve them, in accordance with the laws of association of the imagination, and hence in a subjective regard, as a means of reproduction; such things are either words, or visible (algebraic, even mimetic) signs, as mere expressions for concepts. [...] (Kant, Judgment, 226)

This distinction is made by Kant to rule out the sublime from any conventional way of representation. The sublime remains a negative pleasure that can only be

86 Lyotard writes: “This aesthetic comprehension of the whole (at one time) of a very large or infinite series is what reason demands of the imagination and what provokes the sublime emotion.” J. F. Lyotard. Lessons on the Analytic of the sublime, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994 pp. 109

negatively defined for what is not. Yet, for its being an epiphany of the power of the imagination beyond itself, the sublime is intended by the Early Romantics as an endless source of poetic inspiration. The sublime needs to be signified otherwise, literally, allegorically (allos- other and -agoreo set forth).

I argue that Novalis’ Heinrich Von Ofterdingen represents the search for a third way to represent the sublime, as intended by Kant, beyond the schematic and the symbolic. Novalis builds a text where the experience of the sublime is in the interplay of both logical and figurative representations. According to my analysis, the novel is structured around a movement of folding and unfolding of two opposite strategies: one toward the intellectual abstraction and one toward the proliferation of symbolic signs. In the development of this model, Novalis reworks the classic category of allegory in a romantic sense. The opposition between a logic and a figurative sign becomes the basis for the shaping of a new idea of reader intended as a poetic subject that in turning, folding, and reversing the different levels of the literary discourse, experiences the ambivalent nature of the sublime that is, as we have seen, the nature itself of the working of the imagination. This particular rhetorical strategy can be regarded in many ways as a reworking of the conflict represented already by the Baroque conceit between what the sign shows and what the sign represents. Novalis synthesizes this opposition in the theory of the hieroglyph that, in my view, determines the particular rhetorical construction of the text.

In this chapter I first discuss the theory of the hieroglyph as presented in one of Novalis’ philosophical fragments and its rhetorical implications. Second, I
show how the rhetoric of the hieroglyph is unfolded in the novel and its relationship with the Baroque allegory and conceit. Thirdly and lastly, I argue that through the construction of a hieroglyphic structure Novalis designs a model of a reader capable of turning its poetic ingenuity into the very source of the experience of the sublime. I argue that such experience must be intended as the final stage of an aesthetic education that leads the “I” to gain awareness of its poetic skills and to thus narrow the distance between the text and his own imagination, becoming part of the creative process itself by folding and unfolding, almost through a Baroque gesture, the different layers of significations of the novel.

3.1 The Allegory and the Hieroglyph

If the sublime represents the blind spot of philosophy, Novalis’ novel can be seen as the venture into such blindness. Heinrich Von Ofterdingen has a pretty linear plot, at least in the first part, and it can roughly be described as a journey of education of a youth to poetry. At the level of the narrative mechanics, the text proposes a crescendo, a climax, which leads the reader to observe the growth of the character as he comes across stories, accidents and people that all contribute in some way to define his consciousness of art and poetry. Things are obviously not that easy, but I believe it is important to remark on the obvious in order to understand where and how the text deviates from the norm and how it shapes its own rhetorical uniqueness. If the novel, to put it as Foster would, tells a story, where is the matrix of the plot to be found? What is the dramatic core of the
action? I am interested in exploring how at the level of the rhetoric, the novel designs an ideal journey from allegory a higher vision of art and subjectivity as an inextricable hieroglyph. To make my last statement less obscure, I will now analyze two passages from Novalis’ fragments where allegory, poetry, and hieroglyphs are put into relation. In one of his philosophical fragments, Novalis writes:

The first art is the study of hieroglyphics (Die Erste Kunst ist Hieroglyphistik). Then the art of communication and reflection, or language, and the art of representation and shaping, or poetry, are still one. Not until later does this raw mass divide -then the art of naming arises, language in the true sense -philosophy- and fine art, creative art, poetry itself. The wisdom of riddles, or the art of concealing the substance under its own characteristics -of mystically confusing its features, belongs in this period as practice for the ingenuity of youth. Mystical, allegorical works may have been the beginning of this popularization of the earliest theorems- if indeed knowledge itself did not come straight into the world in this popular form. Parables are a much later formation. Artificial or technical poetry in general includes rhetorical poetry. The character of artificial poetry of purposiveness- it is directed toward the outside. Language in the most authentic sense belongs in the sphere of artificial poetry. Its purpose is specific communication. Thus if one wants to call language, expression of an intention, then all artificial poetry is language, its purpose is specific communication, arousal of specific thought. The novel belongs to the category of natural poetry, the allegory to that of the artificial. Natural poetry can often have the appearance of the artificial, the didactic, without suffering any harm. But it must be connected to it only by chance, only freely. This appearance of allegory then gives it yet another stimulus and it cannot have enough forms of stimulus (excitements of all kinds). Music- sculpture, and poetry are synonyms.  

The long quotation is indispensable in understanding the rhetorical map where Novalis places his novel and why. The passage can be seen as an ideal reconstruction of the development of language in highly theoretical, almost mythical, terms. The map could be broken down in the following parts:

I believe that Novalis’ fragment contains a hidden map that deserves to be carefully followed in order to understand the particular trajectory of his writing. Novalis describes a process that is both of evolution and involution. The point of departure is the notion of the hieroglyph. Yet this very notion can be explained only at the end of the map, as both the starting and ending point of the journey.

The concept of hieroglyph does not find an exhaustive definition in Novalis. Perhaps, the most important reference to it is to be found at the beginning of the Fichte Studies where Novalis states that “The ‘I’ has a hieroglyphic power.” The notion of hieroglyph is to be understood as something belonging to subjectivity. What is the nature of this power? What is it that makes
the hieroglyph the first science? The answer dwells partly in the meaning itself of the word.

Hieroglyph already contains in itself a sublime conflict: the word comes from hieros (sacred) and glyphos (engraving). The two parts of the word are specular and at the same time in antithesis, they complement and negate each other. The “sacred” and the “engraving” must be intended in light of the twofold idea of hieroglyph as both an art (Kunst) and a power (Kraft). As art, the hieroglyph belongs to the sphere of the making, of the craftsmanship, and thus to the general idea of engraving as leaving a mark on a surface; a material cut. As power, the hieroglyph is part of a higher and more abstract sphere of meanings: the visual sign becomes the cypher for the vision of something not immediately visible in the engraving, in the glyph. The hieros and the glyph design a great zone: the glyph would not be meaningful without the hieros, and the hieros would not be visible without the glyph. The hieroglyph synthesizes a conflict between extreme forces: between a material and temporal mark and an abstract, non-verbal, sacred dimension accessible only through the concrete sign produced by art. Yet, Novalis firmly distinguishes the hieroglyph from language: that between hieros and glyph is not the nominal relationship between signifier and signified. To Novalis, language follows the art of hieroglyphs, it is somehow both an overcoming of and a detriment to the primary art. With language the following features come into existence: 1) Communication, 2) Rhetoric, 3) Philosophy, 4) Creative Art, 5) Poetry 6) Allegory, and 7) Riddles. The first observation that comes to mind is that, apparently, the art of hieroglyphs is none
of the above. Like the sublime, the hieroglyph is defined negatively, per absentia. To Novalis language implies purposiveness, intentional communication, and construction of mystifying appearances that conceal their meaning. Philosophy and art are seen as particular forms of allegory, in the broad sense of artificial constructions of linguistic relations. Poetry is the only language that straddles in between of artificial and natural and yet, we lack a definition of natural poetry in the passage that, again, is illustrated only negatively for what is not: unintentional, non-communicative and non-allegorical. The development of language after the primary art of hieroglyph ultimately ends in two directions: natural and artificial poetry. Novalis clearly states that the novel, as a genre, belongs to natural poetry as opposed to allegory as “the art of concealing the substance under its own characteristics, of mystically confusing its features, […] as practice for the ingenuity of youth.”

Novel and allegory seem to irremediably belong to opposite languages. Yet, Novalis states that allegory can enter the natural language of a novel as stimulus. The German word Reiz may signify a stimulus in general but also, more specifically, something charming and alluring, almost tempting. In this sense, the allegory has the function of introducing disguises into the text, as well as purposive images, riddles, all with the function of alluring the reader. The bond within the natural dimension of the novel and the artificial nature of allegory must always appear as accidental (zufällig) and not substantial. The non-purposiveness of the novel must supersede the charm and allure of the mystifying disguises of the allegory. While in Kant the allegorical was intended
as intentional exemplification of an argument, in Novalis the allegorical (very much like Vico) is intended as negation of the very nature of poetry, as an artificial construction only accidentally related to the inner nature of language. I believe that the idea of hieroglyph is the middle point between natural and artificial, novel and allegory.\footnote{The definition of allegory during Romanticism is usually obscured by a larger concentration of the idea of irony that is more extensively debated by Romantic writers as in F. v. Schlegel. \textit{Gespräch über die Poesie}. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1968. Most of the time the two are confused and considered the same. This approach is grounded in Schlegel brother’s \textit{Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature} (see: A. W. v. Schlegel, \textit{Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur}. Wein: Schade, 1825. Especially lectures twelve and twenty-seven). As Jon Whitman points out, the distinction the Romantics draw is between allegory and symbol according to which “in allegorical writing the image is separable from the idea; in symbolic writing, the one inherently participates in the other” J. Whitman. \textit{Allegory: the dynamics of an ancient and medieval technique}. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1987. p. 289. Azade Seyhan, however, argues that despite allegory and irony can be seen as “twin tropes of Romantic poetry” the two should not be confused. According to Seyhan, “in Romantic poetry, allegory constitutes the representation of an intercepted infinity. Although no clear critical definition distinguishes allegory from symbol and both terms are often used interchangeably, allegory consistently designates an ideal that coincides with an elusiveness characteristic of temporality” A. Seyhan. \textit{Representation and its discontents: the critical legacy of German Romanticism}. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. pp. 67-68. On the rhetorical relation between allegory and irony see H. Lausberg. \textit{Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik: eine Einführung für Studierende der klassischen, romanischen, englischen und deutschen Philologie}. Ismaning: Hueber, 1990.}

In Heinrich Von Ofterdingen, Novalis uses a rhetoric of the hieroglyph as a narrative device. Through the rhetorical structure of the novel, Novalis builds a textual subject which experiences the conflict generating from a representation that always includes its reversal, its specular double. The reader becomes the middle point of a narrative based on the interplay of allegorical expectations and the endless poetic metamorphosis of the poetic language. Thus, in the novel, the
hieroglyph is materialized in a rhetorical praxis based on the constant repetition and juxtaposition of material signs (glyphs) and abstract hieros, thus alluring the reader to believe in the existence of a transcending meaning which is constantly delayed and postponed. Heinrich Von Ofterdingen can be read as a form of a backward journey from the hiatus of allegory and novel, artificial and natural, to the original form of a hieroglyphic art.

3.2 The Blue Flower between Metaphor and Metonymy

In moving forward, the novel maps the journey of the protagonist’s progressive discovery of the twofold nature of language as I described above. In this sense, it is not simply a story of aesthetic education, but of the discovery of Heinrich’s vocation to poetry. The text is a more subtle narrative aimed at leading the reader through the same venture of the protagonist. The “I” of the reader experiences a sublime feeling of overwhelmingness. To regain his original hieroglyphic power, the reader must experience the polarities of language: abstraction and materiality of the sign; allegory and poetic ingenuity. The opening paragraph of the novel puts the reader in the midst of this conflict:

Henry’s parents were already asleep; the clock on the wall was ticking monotonously; outside the rattling windows the wind whistled by. From time to time the moon’s glimmer lit up the room. The youth lay restless on his bed and thought about the stranger and his stories. ‘It is not the treasures which I have awakened such an inexpressible longing in me.’ he said to himself. ‘There is no greed in my heart; but I yearn to get a glimpse of the blue flower. It is perpetually in my mind, and I can write or think of nothing else. I have never felt like this before; it seems as if I had a dream just then, or as if a slumber had carried me into another world. For in the world where I had always lived, who ever bothered about flowers?
Besides, such a strange passion for a flower is something I never heard of before. I wonder where the stranger really came from.\textsuperscript{90}

The passage serves a double function: establishing the narrative coordinates of the text on one hand, and defining the symbolical code in which the narrative is framed on the other. The paragraph is organized around binary oppositions: the youth and the old parents; the quiet outside and the restless sleep in the inside; imagination and desire. Heinrich has heard a story from a stranger that has strongly affected his imagination and left him longing to take a glimpse (erblinen) at a blue flower. This flower is what the story of the stranger was about. Yet, the reader is not given any detail about the story that precedes the beginning of the narrative. Furthermore, the obscure origin of the flower leaves the reader in a state of longing similar to that of the protagonist. Like Heinrich, the reader imagines (denken und dikten) the identity of the flower but ignores its origin. The flower is the symbol that marks the journey of Heinrich. Its identity is the crucial question around which the development of the plot revolves.

Heinrich can neither stop thinking nor poeticizing about the flower. The image captures both his intellectual and creative skills. In this sense, the flower brings together abstraction and concrete expression. Heinrich thinks about the origin of the symbol; where it comes from; why he is so obsessed with it. The flower joins both abstract communication and natural expression. The youth, like the reader, wonders about the origin and the meaning of the flower, about its purpose, about what message, if any, it hides. At the same time, the reader is caught in Heinrich’s imagination which builds images over images to depict and retain in his mind the figure of the flower even if temporarily remiss of a meaning. The flower is not only a narrative enigma but also a rhetorical conundrum. How are we supposed to intend its presence in the text? Why does it occupy such a prominent position in the opening paragraph of the novel? I believe that the answer to these questions may be outlined only if we consider the flower as a midpoint between an allegorical and a poetic representation.

The flower is presented as an allegory insofar as its significance is to be ascribed to a story (Erzhelung) that happens outside the text and that it establishes an authority over it. The flower is presented as a poetic construction, triggering Heinrich’s inspiration and Verlangen. The flower is in-between of a foreground and a background: it is defined by the obscure origin behind it and at the same time by the poetry which itself generates and that unfolds in Heinrich’s imagination and that constitutes the essential plot of the text. The opposition between schematic and symbolic representation formulated by Kant is found in Novalis a more complex and layered definition. The flower signifies something
that is not there; it is symbolical without actually being a symbol for anything. It is also schematic, in Kantian terms, because it sets up a frame of reference within the text that leads the reader to adjust his expectations. In the following paragraph of the novel, the distance between imagination and reality is deepened and the allegorical significance of the blue flower is made more indefinite:

None of us has ever seen a person like him. Still I can’t understand why I was the only one to be so touched by his stories. The others experienced nothing like it even though the heard the same tales and to think I can’t even talk about my singular condition! Often I feel so rapturously happy; and only when I do not have the flower clearly before my mind’s eye does a deep inner turmoil seize me. This cannot and will not be understood by anyone. I would think I was mad if I did not see and think so clearly. Indeed since then everything is much clearer to me. Once I heard tell of the days of old, how animals and trees and cliffs talked with people then. I feel just as though they might start any moment now and I could tell by their looks what they wanted to say to me. There must be many words I don’t know; if I knew more, I could grasp everything much better. Once I like to dance; now I prefer to meditate on music. (Novalis, Henry Von Ofterdingen, 19)  

Heinrich questions the origin of the narrator of the blue flower. The youth perceives a distance between himself and the rest of the audience that listened to

the story. He is astonished by the indifference the other people showed to the
story while he can not even start to describe his own amazement. The marvel
experienced by Heinrich is reflected in the ambivalent nature of his language.

Heinrich ignores why the story of the stranger affected him so much. At
the beginning of the novel he uses the term Erzählung (tale), while in the passage
quoted above he refers to it by using Rede that can mean story but also, in a more
general sense, speech. In the first paragraph Heinrich is said to be unable to think
or write about anything else but the blue flower (denken and dichten), while in
the second section he states that he is unable to reden, to literally formulate any
speech about the stranger’s story. There is an evident shift in the use of language
which is testified also by the presence of another pair of verbs opposed to denken
and dichten: “sehen and denken,” to see and to think. Heinrich claims to be
unable to speak about his state but he is able to think and see more clearly than
ever. There is a screen between his mind and his language on one hand, and
between his language and the reader on the other. The blue flower stands in
between of a story and a speech; thinking and writing; thinking and seeing. The
different verbs associated to the flower are at the same time different languages.
The flower is a rhetorical conundrum precisely for the inconsistency of its
representation.

Novalis is aware of practicing his writing within the limits of the artificial
language and that for this reason any intentional image is always open to its
counterpart.\textsuperscript{92} Every sign carries along an endless system of references that constantly redefine the meaning of the image and its allegorical investment. Novalis plays with the echo of references the image of the flower implies. The flower is an investment into both an allegorical (as the bearer of an abstract meaning) and a poetical tension (as the unfolding of images throughout the

\textsuperscript{92} This aesthetic idea has one of its founding and most accomplished formulation in the famous opening fragment of the Fichte Studies: The proposition a is a contains nothing but a positing, differentiating and combining. It is a philosophical parallelism. In order to make a more distinct, A is divided (analyzed). “Is” is presented as universal content, “a” as determinate form. The essence of identity can only be presented in an illusory proposition [Scheinsatz]. We abandon the identical in order to present it. Novalis. \textit{Fichte studies}, Ed. Jane Kneller. Cambridge, U.K; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. p. 3

narrative). The flower signifies both and at the same times neither. It is in this particular sense that it must be intended as rhetorical hieroglyph. The flower brings together two instances of the text: the drive toward abstraction and that towards a verbally conspicuous representation. On one hand, the flower suggests the presence of a hieros (sacred) presence behind itself, and on the other hand it presents itself as an enigmatic and undecipherable mark, that stands in its materiality of linguistic signs, as a glyph. Novalis “intentionally” treats the image of the flower as an allegory to almost mislead the reader and promise the emergence of a meaning. The first part of the novel is not by chance entitled Die Erwartung (the expectation). This does not refer only to the protagonist’s expectations of the novel and his desire to realize his poetic vocation. The expectation mirrors the reader’s experience and it describes a particular treatment of the symbolic codes and figures of speech within the text.

After the ambiguous and sophisticated description of the effects of the flower on Heinrich, Novalis leads the reader into the hieros, the abstract world that the flower opens in Heinrich’s imagination. The reader is presented with the description of a dream. The blue flower sets in motion an unraveling of natural images metonymically linked to each other, therefore giving the sense of a

---

93 Azade Seyhan writes: “The blue flower with its wider repertoire of significations is the informing allegory of the novel and points to changing concepts at different temporal levels. It is introduced as a sign of indescribable longing, then becomes a symbol of idea of love, harmony with nature, the key to the code of nature and, in a manner of speaking, the fleur-de-lis of the future kingdom of poetry” (Seyhan, 117). To this reading of the blue flower I intend to add a different perspective based on the rhetorical transformations that the allegory of the flower determines in the text and how, beyond its symbolical meanings, the flower informs the system of expectations of the narrative and contribute thus to define the role of the reader within the text.
continuity of forms. The youth dreams of walking into a dark forest, then to climb over some rocks to reach a small meadow that lies on the slope of a mountain. Heinrich sees an opening in one of the rocks surrounding the meadow. He walks into it and he finds himself on a winding path that leads him into a cave illuminated by a beam of light emerging from a fountain placed in the middle. The liquid in the fountain magically covers the walls of the vault. Heinrich feels an irresistible urge to bathe in the fountain. The water produces in him a “heavenly sensation” and “new images never seen before arose and interfused and became visible beings around him.” Then Heinrich falls into a deep slumber and dreams of “indescribable events.” He finds himself next to a fountain surrounded by cliffs. He sees a blue flower which “leaned toward him and its petals displayed an expanded blue corolla wherein a delicate face hovered.” Finally, Heinrich is awakened by his mother’s voice and when he opens his eyes he discovers himself to be in his parents living room. This brief summary of the dream that follows Heinrich’s description of the blue flower is instrumental in defining the symbolic codes and the interplay of different narrative levels which characterize the novel. The text opens with a concentric structure similar to a Chinese box where the borders between containers and contained are blended. The blue flower breaks any frame of the story by constantly redefining the expectations of the reader.

The first frame is the stranger’s story which, by remaining untold and outside the text, envelops the narrative as an Aristotelian first mover: it sets everything in motion without ever moving itself. The blue flower is the trace of
this story. Heinrich’s solitary room and obsessive thinking about the flower is the second frame we are presented in the novel. The dream the flower causes is the third frame. Within the dream, a fourth frame is presented when Heinrich is caught in a slumber, which produces new and indescribable thoughts in him. Finally, we read of Heinrich’s awakening in his parents’ living room and we are hitherto introduced into another frame that of a familiar context, where the real story, so to speak, begins. Every frame represents a different language. We have the language of a story, that of imagination, that of a dream and that of the narrative. The blue flower strongly occupies the scene at the beginning and it then scatters in different directions. It produces an overflow of images and a complex juxtaposition of narrative frames. Novalis plays with the indefinite allegorical value of the flower. When Heinrich awakens in his parents’ living room a conversation about the nature of dreams begins.

Father and son embody the conflict between natural and artificial I outlined above. To Heinrich the dream is a “mysterious curtain” that represents the gate to an inner life; it is the disguised figure of something “remarkable” that needs to be deciphered. On the contrary, the father does not see in dreams any divine or higher message. In other words, while Heinrich seeks purposiveness into the dream, the father denies any value of “miracle-working images.” Father and son represent the hiatus of the hieroglyph: they are the personification of the conflict between allegorical and graphical, abstract and concrete. To Heinrich the dream carries a hidden meaning. To the father the dream is a happening, a sign which produces pleasure but that does not really signify anything.
At this point of the dialogue the mother breaks in and tries to conciliate the two. She tells her husband to recall a dream he had several years ago, before they got married. Apparently the dream had left such a strong impression on the young father that once he was awake he traveled to Rome to immediately ask Heinrich’s mother to marry him. This dream seems to somehow lower the father’s defense against the “miraculous effects of dreams.” Father and son seem to finally reach a common ground. Their thoughts seem to converge into one. The father’s dream was also made of mountains, openings into caves, fountains and flowers. One flower stood out:

‘Everywhere fountains and flowers, and among all the flowers one pleased me especially, and it seemed to me that the others leaned toward this one.’
‘Ah Dearest father, please tell me what color it was,’ the lad said with violent agitation.
‘I cannot remember that, although the other details are still clearly impressed on my mind.’
‘Was it not blue?’
‘Maybe it was,’ the father continued without paying any attention to Henry’s strange vehemence.

The crescendo is interrupted. The two minds were almost joining each other in the vision of the same flower. To Heinrich it is not enough to know that someone so close to him like his father had an almost identical dream. The flower, the blue flower, is what really interests the youth. Why this insistence on the color of the flower? After all, the father remembers a lot of other details to which Heinrich does not show any interest as well as the father do not seem to care about what his son’s relentlessness on the matter is. Heinrich is looking for a reference to the flower outside himself. Heinrich needs to know that at least one more person has
once experienced a particular attraction to that flower. Discovering the existence, so to speak, of the blue flower in someone else’s mind is a way to pin down that image on something and make it less fluctuant. The search of the blue flower in his father’s dream is the reflection of a rhetorical need in the text to balance abstraction and writing; allegorical tendency and poetic creation. The blue flower exerts an allegorical agency in Heinrich’s character because it causes him to look for a sign that may help him to decipher the secret he believes is hidden in the image. He seeks some trace of a constant that may help him to find the first key of the cypher; a pattern to help define where and what the flower is pointing at. This pattern is however broken by the uncertain memory of his father. His answer to Heinrich’s question (Es kann sein) eludes a possible definition of the flower and thus it obstructs any allegorical interpretation of the image. Is it a flower that stands only as a glyph, a sign in the imagination, or something hieros, a sign that signifies something more than what it shows?

At a rhetorical level, the text exhibits a conflict between metonymic and metaphorical continuity. In terms of metonymic continuity the text seems to

---

94 In the Fichte Studies Novalis writes: “Space is the outer condition, time the inner condition, of sensible intuition, or feeling/Consequently only through a sign. But if, as just stated, sign and signified are completely separated, if they are related only in the first signifying [agent], then it can only be an accident (Zufall) or a miracle (Wunder) if the signified is received by the second signifying [agent] through such a sign. Objectively and subjectively necessary signs, /which at bottom is the same/ are therefore the only things through which something that is thought can be communicated. In order to communicate, the first signifying [agent] need only choose such signs as have a well-grounded necessary relationship to the signified in the homogeneous being of the second signifying agent. The homogeneity of the alien being with that of its own [being] in this relationship will have to be studied by it in this communication” (Novalis, Fichte Studies, 8).
accomplish a circular movement. After his deep dreams Heinrich mysteriously wakes up in his parents living room. The imaginary wonders of the characters are framed by two rooms in the same house: it starts in a bedroom alone and ends in a room during the day with other people. Yet, next to this shift, the text seems to almost accomplish a metaphorical reunion between Heinrich’s and his father’s imaginations. This translation of the minds (in its etymological sense of moving across) is unaccomplished by the deficiency of the father’s memory. The text builds a continuity that makes two ends almost meet to then separate again. Metonymically Heinrich and his father are close to each other, but the metaphorical value of their images remains untranslatable. The conflict between continuity and disruption, metonymy and metaphor, is what feeds Heinrich’s pursuit of a higher purpose for the flower, of its allegorical significance. The continuity of forms and their blending into each other do not necessarily entail any purposiveness. The images give the illusion of a meaning that as yet remains unspoken, like a hieroglyph where the glyph fails to deliver the hieros.

This rhetorical conflict is at the basis of the poetic education that the character of Heinrich undergoes throughout his journey. The first chapter of the novel is a sort of “critico-epistemological prologue,” to use Benjamin’s famous expression, to the whole text. The flower is the glyph, the mark left by the stranger’s story. The blue flower is the source of oneiric and imaginative constructions. The images it generates appear as disguises, as enigmatic codes waiting to be solved. The novel starts as the pursuit of these codes. Yet, whenever a meaning seems to be unveiled, the flower assumes another disguise, and the
narrative takes another unpredictable path. This dialectic between the quest for an allegorical meaning and the persistence of the images as the only real signs determines the rhetorical structure of the novel. Heinrich’s search for a purposive representation clashes against the uncontrolled and natural happening of poetry. The rest of the novel tells the story of the expansion of the blue flower and its enigma in new and diverse shapes. The first chapter serves as an introduction to what the narrative will look like. It is in the second chapter that Heinrich’s journey begins.

He sets off to visit his maternal grandfather in his mother’s hometown. We learn how the youth had never left home before and how his knowledge of the world was entirely based on stories and on a few books (die Welt war ihm nur aus Erzählungen bekannt). The stranger’s story we encountered at the beginning is thus part of Heinrich’s whole catalog of knowledge. To the youth, stories and knowledge are one. Right before bidding farewell to his town, his mind lingers on fantastic images of princes and poor people, ancient realms and old life styles. Among the images that cross Heinrich’s mind one is of particular interest. He focuses on the significance of tools, instruments and utensils:

the feeling people had for the utensils and possessions they gathered about them for the manifold service of life was all the more deep and tender. These things and possessions seemed more valuable and remarkable. If the mysteries of nature and the origin of the materials found in it attracted the intuiting spirit, the rarer art of shaping them into new products, the romantic distance from which these were received, and the sacredness of their antiquity heightened man's attachment to these
 mute companions of life, since, when more carefully preserved, they often became the heritage of several generations.\textsuperscript{95}

What justifies the presence of this reflection on the romanticism of utensils at the inception of Heinrich’s journey? The reflection is a prosecution of the enigma posited by the blue flower. As we have seen, in the first chapter of the novel Heinrich is driven by the flower into a dreamy and fanciful world were real and fictional blend. In the dialogue with his father the youth seems to be at the point of finding, if not an answer, something to hold on to in order to understand the meaning of the flower. The father’s answer deludes Heinrich’s expectations (and by the same token those of the reader). The blue flower remains the product of one of the many stories the protagonist has heard. Its significance has yet to be found but in Heinrich’s own fixation, in his own unexplainable obsession with the image. The flower is the trigger of Heinrich’s imagination but at the same time it is also the product of his very own imagination. The blue flower is in many ways the tool built by Heinrich to map his way through the world: it is the result of a secular transformation of tools that are passed along from a generation to another. In a sense, the stranger’s story is to Heinrich the vehicle through which a secret art of shaping forms is transmitted to him.

\textsuperscript{95} Dafür war aber der Sinn für die Gerätschaften und Habseligkeiten, die der Mensch zum manngfachen Dienst seines Lebens um sich her versammelt, desto zarter und tiefer. Sie waren den Menschen werter und merkwürdiger. Zog schon das Geheimnis der Natur und die Entstehung ihrer Körper den ahndenden Geist an: so erhöhte die seltner Kunst ihrer Bearbeitung die romantische Ferne, aus der man sie erhielt, und die Heiligkeit ihres Altertums, da sie sorgfältiger bewahrt, oft das Besitztum mehrerer Nachkommenschaft wurden, die Neigung zu diesen stummen Gefährten des Lebens. (Novalis, \textit{Ofterdingen}, 139)
The novel is sending the reader a signal, a sort of warning. The journey starts under the sign of the art of shape crafting. This Kunst is a rhetorical conundrum, which, as we will see, produces a constant overlap of narrative levels and of figures of speech. Heinrich seeks an allegorical meaning of the blue flower, he looks for the transcendent essence of it. Yet the flower, like an ancient tool, carries along a continuity of images. Every image that Heinrich meets seems to hold a piece of the secret cypher of the general picture and yet any interpretations are made difficult by the constant juxtaposition of images and signs. This rhetorical conundrum could be represented in dialectical terms. Here is a possible graphical representation:

![Graphical representation]

The continuity of images produced by the blue flower is interrupted by the necessity of finding their symbolic equivalents. To make sense, every image needs to be translated into its conceptual representation. The objective of this symbolical interpretation is a way to reach the higher allegorical sense of the image and its hidden purpose. For example: Heinrich’s dream is a metonymic association of images generating from the blue flower (nature-mountains-cave-fountain-flowers); this chain is compared to his father’s dream in order to
understand whether their occurrence is circumstantial or dictated by necessity. This rhetorical ambiguity is at the core of the idea of hieroglyph that I have so far described: the glyph is constituted by both a metonymic and metaphorical order of images, while the hieros is the allegorical (purposiveness) that remains unspoken. The triangle could thus be expanded like this:

![Diagram]

This graph helps us to visualize two main issues. First, the rhetoric implied in the figure of the blue flower can be inscribed within the structure of a hieroglyph. This means that the blue flower is the tool through which the text is imaginary engraved and sculptured. Second, the problematic relationship between image and its purpose reproduces the same ambiguity described by Kant in the representation of the sublime. To use the Kantian terminology, the image in the text breaks both the patterns of a symbolic and a schematic communication. We observe in Novalis’ novel a similar dichotomy. The important difference is that in the case of Heinrich von Ofterdingen, the rhetorical complexity is the apparent purposiveness of the novel, its narrative drive. The hiatus between the image and
its meaning is the way through which Novalis reworks the problem of the sublime. The novel is precisely built on the opposition between necessity of expression and intuitions beyond the text; an apparent purposiveness and an invisible higher purposiveness. The dialectic between sign and interpretation determines the peculiar structure of the novel.

The first five chapters tell the story of Heinrich’s journey toward his mother’s hometown. Along the way the youth meets several older fellow travelers with whom he engages in conversations about the nature of poetry. These travelers are also, and more importantly, story tellers. During the journey the men tell Heinrich a series of tales on the nature of poetry. In chapter two, before the first of these stories is told, Heinrich debates with his fellow travelers the nature of knowledge and whether the world can be understood by logical or intuitive thinking. We read:

> I do not know, but it seems to me I see two roads leading to the knowledge of human history. The one, wearisome and without visible goal, with countless twists and turns—the way of experience; the other, hardly more than a single leap, the way of intuition. He who takes the first road has to figure out one thing from another by laborious calculation, while he who takes the second immediately penetrates to the essence of every event and object and is able to contemplate these essences in their vital complex interrelationship and easily compare them with everything else like numbers on a slate. (Novalis, Henry Von Ofterdingen, 29-30)

---

96 Ich weiß nicht, aber mich dünkt, ich sähe zwei Wege um zur Wissenschaft der menschlichen Geschichte zu gelangen. Der eine, mühsam und unansehnlich, mit unzähligen Krümmungen, der Weg der Erfahrung; der andere, fast ein Sprung nur, der Weg der innern Betrachtung. Der Wanderer des ersten muss eins aus dem andern in einer langwierigen Rechnung finden, wenn der andere die Natur jeder Begebenheit und jeder Sache gleich unmittelbar anschaut, und sie in ihrem lebendigen, mannigfaltigen Zusammenhänge betrachten, und leicht mit allen übrigen, wie Figuren auf einer Tafel, vergleichen kann. (Novalis, Ofterdingen, 23-24)
Wie Figuren auf einer Tafel. This is the crucial image of the passage. Heinrich’s speech is highly metaphorical: knowledge is seen as a journey and the man who seeks knowledge as a wanderer at a crossroad. There are two paths: that of experience and that of intuition. Erfahrung and Betrachtung are the polarities of a same spectrum. Experience involves the gathering of information, observation of details, and the reconstruction of what the mind has processed into a meaningful logical sentence. Experience is also the place of articulate language, of the production of sense. Diversely, intuition implies a completely different mindset. The subject who relies on intuitions is not only able to see things for what they really are and penetrate their essence but, above all, to compare (vergleichen) everything as if they are like figures on a slate. Intuition breaks the logical chain of ordinary language in favor of a synoptic vision of the real as engraved figures. The wanderer at the crossroad may be seen as an image for Heinrich himself but most likely it is a figure that stands for the position occupied by the reader in the text.

The two paths of experience and intuition correspond to two modalities of reading. Is the reader supposed to gather details of the story and organize them in a logical construction or is he expected to visualize the story as a figure on a slate? The two modalities, albeit radically different, are not incompatible. On the contrary, they complete each other and constitute another formulation of the dialectic between glyph and hieros. In order to logically understand a sequence of events a subject must be able to put them in the right order and be able to interpret and translate the meaning of each singular event into the whole. At the
level of rhetoric, this is a further argument for a reading based on a metonymic and metaphorical approach. A reading based on intuitions necessitates the subject’s ability to visualize beyond words what the text is about. This theoretical gesture (intended as theorein, intellectual contemplation) is directed at the understanding of the whole beyond the details that compound it. The intuitive reader sees allegorically: he sees that everything signifies something else and everything is held together in one big image.

Heinrich’s speech is too sophisticated for his listeners who promptly reply that they are not be able to follow him and that he seems “to have a poetic talent” (Novalis, Ofterdingen, 30). The ability to distinguish between two paths of knowledge is enough to show an artistic tendency. Yet, Heinrich states how he never met a poet and that he can hardly form an idea about their “strange art.” The stories that Heinrich listens to from his fellow travelers must be read and contextualized in light of this idea of a “strange art” at work.

The first story is about a wealthy musician who is cast away by the sailors he hired to travel on a ship with all of his treasures. Alone and deprived of his wealth, the man plays his instrument to the sea. All the creatures of the sea are inspired by his music and manage to bring back to the musician all his treasures. This first story, which I only roughly summarized, is followed by a longer and more detailed tale. In the second story Heinrich hears about two youth falling in love. A sensitive unmarried princess ventures one day into the woods with her horse. She comes across a solitary cabin where an old man and his son live alone. The old man greets her and warmly welcomes her inside recognizing she must
be from the royal court but without recognizing the features of the princess. The young man is struck by the beauty of the girl and of his celestial apparition (Einschaung). The girl’s attention is held by many strange and unique objects she sees around her, especially some images (Bilder) which the old man explains to her. The explanation of the images and what these images represent is left outside of the story. When the girl leaves, fascinated and overwhelmed by a sense of “poetry,” she drops a precious stone that is retrieved by the young man. The stone is wrapped in some paper for protection and brought back to the cabin. At some point the youth feels the urge to write some poetry on the paper that wrapped the stone. He writes that “there is engraved an enigmatic token/full deep into the jewel’s glowing blood.” When the princess goes back to the cabin to retrieve the stone the two youths fall in love with each other. The young man had spent his life studying books with his father in the cabin. The girl was trained in all the courtly arts, particularly in music. Their love, before becoming physical, is solely based on the exchange of knowledge and art. One night the girl can not return to the palace due to a storm. They find refuge in a cave where they finally kiss each other. She reveals herself to be the princess and they decide to reveal their love to her father. They need a plan, since the proud old King would not easily accept a marriage with a man of inferior rank. Thus, a year passes and the two youths have a child. One day the young man, now perfectly trained in music and poetry, appears at the court of the king and starts singing a song about the golden age that sweetens the king’s heart. All the courtly poets are amazed by the voice of the young man. At some point an old man and a
veiled woman carrying a child make their entrance. The youth continues to sing and finally reveals, through his songs, that the woman standing there is none other but the king’s daughter. The sovereign, who for a year had mourned his daughter thinking her dead, embraces the youths and the child and welcomes them in the court as husband and wife along with the father of the young man.

What is the function of these stories? What do they tell Heinrich about poetry? The answer to these questions depends on an analysis of the position the stories occupy in the narrative and on their rhetorical function. The meaning of the two tales is not clarified by the text; they are not parable; there is no omniscient voice that can explain them to the reader. It is not clear whether they allegorically signify the meaning of art or they serve as an anticipatory function in the economy of the narrative. Novalis juxtaposes the stories in such a way to create an order of expectations. If we intend to logically understand the two tales, we would need to interpret all the individual elements and fit them into a coherent meaningful pattern. However such operation would extract the story from the context of the novel. Similarly, if we wanted to observe the story as a figure on a slate, connecting the parts into an intuitive vision, we would risk bestowing upon the story a higher significance transcending the textual dimension.

Novalis traps the reader into a double bind. The purpose of the meta-narratives is clouded by their rhetorical function. Both stories are about separation and reunion. Poetry plays a role in the movement from the one to the other; it joins what is apart and reunites what is divided. The second story in
particular stages a sort of poetic training which serves the purpose of persuading people (specifically the King). The meta-narratives have the function of building anticipation about Heinrich’s journey. Will the story at the end of the novel be understood as a part of a formative journey? Will it be revealed as a prophecy of Heinrich’s future? There is a semantic gap that only the succession of events in the novel can fill.

As I suggested, the two stories have an anticipatory function. If we consider what happens in chapters four and five this point can certainly be made clearer. As a matter of fact, Heinrich experiences situations, which echo those narrated by his fellow travelers. The meta-narrative and the main narrative begin to blend. The two episodes I will refer to are the encounter with Zulima and that with the old minor, which both take place before the youth reaches his destination.

In chapter four, Heinrich and his travel mates stop in a castle for the night. The lord of the castle is an old warrior who spends his life with former fellow warriors in banquets. Heinrich and his company are welcomed in the castle and soon the warriors start to talk about their time in the Holy Land and of the Crusades. The lord says that one oriental woman now lives in his castle as his prisoner. The warriors begin singing a song about their glorious deeds. Heinrich is aroused by the music and the marvel of the stories. He dashes outside in complete excitement. At some point he hears the sound of a flute and a sobbing female voice singing a sad song. He approaches the source of the melody and discovers a young woman in tears. She is the old warrior’s prisoner from the
Holy Land. At this point another meta-narrative begins. The young woman, named Zulima, tells Heinrich about the beauties of her homeland, among which she mentions groves “vocal with gay-colored birds of melodious throats, and attractive because of many vestiges of memorable bygone ages” (Novalis, Ofterdingen, 60). The woman continues:

You would be amazed [...] to see the strange, bright and many colored figures and scenes on the old stone slabs there. They look so familiar, it appears to be not without reason that they are preserved so well. You meditate and meditate and guess at a meaning now and then and get all the more eager to unravel the profound connection of these primitive inscriptions. The unknown spirit of these arouses uncommon reflection; and even if one leaves without the wished-for revelation still one has made a thousand remarkable discoveries within oneself, which give a new splendor to life and provide the mind with a long and rewarding occupation. (Novalis, Ofterdingen, 60-61)

Zulima’s speech about the mysteries of the Orient focuses on one specific aspect that we have already found in several places of the novel: the existence of enigmatic signs engraved on slates. The young woman presents Heinrich with the dilemma he has been trying to deal with since the first “apparition” of the blue flower in his dreams. What is this enigmatic sign pointing towards? What is its origin? Is it the trace of an old memory passed over through the stranger's story? The dilemma is that of the hieroglyphic representation, of the sign that

97 Ihr würdet mit Verwunderung, sagte sie, die buntfarbigen, hellen, seltsamen Züge und Bilder auf den alten Steinplatten sehn. Sie scheinen so bekannt und nicht ohne Ursache so wohl erhalten zu sein. Man sinnt [237] und sinnt, einzelne Bedeutungen ahnet man, und wird um so begieriger den tiefsinndigen Zusammenhang dieser uralten Schrift zu erraten. Der unbekannte Geist derselben erregt ein ungewöhnliches Nachdenken, und wenn man auch ohne den gewünschten Fund von dannen geht, so hat man doch tausend merkwürdige Entdeckungen in sich selbst gemacht, die dem Leben einen neuen Glanz und dem Gemüht eine lange, belohnende Beschäftigung geben. (Novalis, Heinrich Von Ofterdingen, 174-174)
points toward an allegorical meaning which fails to be revealed. Zulima seems to suggest to Heinrich a possible solution. What is at stake in the appreciation of this ancient and mysterious sign is not the revelation of their meaning (the hieros we may say), but a “long rewarding occupation (eine lange, belohnende Beschäftigung) of the mind.” The silent mystery of the glyphs is actually the source of an inner pleasure. In the gap that divides the sign from its meaning something happens that gives new splendor (Glanz) to life. Heinrich is so captured by her words that he asks for a memory of their encounter “the ribbon with the unknown letters you have in your hair” (63). The youth wants to carry with him a token of the mystery that the woman described to him. Novalis’ continuous juxtaposition of narrative and meta-narratives, poetry and reflection on poetry has the effect of creating a grey zone where the reader is promised the revelation of a meaning that instead is constantly delayed and displaced into new meta-narratives. As I said, there is a repetitive pattern at work. Novalis builds his text by proposing over and over the same signs under different shapes.

In chapter five, this repetitive pattern is strengthened. After a few more days of travel they stop in a village at the foot of a big mountain. At the inn where they decide to spend the night, they meet an old miner that entertains the travelers with stories about his profession. The old man praises mining as a noble art for its being all about the knowledge of nature. The miner says:

The miner is born poor and he dies poor. He is content to know where the metal powers are found and to bring them to the light of day, but their dazzling glamor has no power over his pure heart. Uninflamed by perilous frenzy, he takes more delight in their peculiar structures and their strange origin and habitat than in their possession which promises so much. They have no charm for him any more once they are turned into
commercial articles, and he had rather look for them within the strongholds of the earths amid a thousand dangers and drudgeries than to follow their call into the world and to strive after them up on the surface by means deluding, deceitful art. (Novalis, Henry Von Ofterdingen, 69-70) 

The miner’s speech is very similar to Zulima’s. The woman had told Heinrich that, in investigating the signs of the old ages, the subject can receive pleasure and learn something new even if not able to understand and decipher the meaning of those signs. Everything is in the process. By the same token, the miner is after metals not for their commercial or instrumental value. He only rejoices in learning about their shapes (Bildungen), oddities (Seltsamkeiten), and dwellings (Whonungen). Once the miner has discovered these three aspects of any metal there is no more “Reiz,” stimulus in him. It is important to notice here how Reiz is the same word that we met in the philosophical fragment I analyzed at the beginning of the section on Novalis. In that fragment, Reiz was associated to the stimuli that allegory, as artificial construction, can bring into the stream of natural poetry represented by the novel. I believe there is the shadow on an intertextual reference.

---

98 Arm wird der Bergmann geboren, und arm gehet er wieder dahin. Er begnügt sich zu wissen, wo die metallischen Mächte gefunden werden, und sie zu Tage zu fördern; aber ihr blendender Glanz vermag nichts über sein lautes Herz. Unentzündet von gefährlichem Wahnsinn, freut er sich mehr über ihre wunderlichen Bildungen, und die Seltsamkeiten ihrer Herkunft und ihrer Wohnungen, als über ihren alles verheißenden Besitz. Sie haben für ihn keinen Reiz mehr, wenn sie Waren geworden sind, und [245] er sucht sie lieber unter tausend Gefahren und Mühseligkeiten in den Vesten der Erde, als dass er ihrem Rufe in die Welt folgen, und auf der Oberfläche des Bodens durch täuschende, hinterlistige Künste nach ihnen trachten sollte. (Novalis, Heinrich Von Ofterdingen, 183)
In fact, so far we have seen how the illusion of an allegorical meaning in the novel has worked as the trigger for a continuous multiplication of figures, stories and meta-narratives that reflect each other. The quest for allegory is in all respects a Reiz, a stimulus that informs the nature of the text. The images that compound the novel are in a hieroglyphic relation to this Reiz insofar as they stand as marks and traces of a meaning that constantly delays its appearance. Heinrich’s journey can be seen as the swinging between the Reiz of the glyph and that of the hieros, albeit the two instances fail to meet.

This structuring pattern becomes manifested even more in the second part of chapter five when the company of travelers decides to follow the miner to the mountain where he used to work. The path they follow, from the woods into the opening of a cave, resembles the one designed in Heinrich’s dream at the beginning of the novel. In the cave they hear a song and following its melody they reach a vault where an old man is seated singing before a stone slab on top of which a book lies. In a dream-like state of mind, Heinrich approaches the book:

At length he came across a volume written in a foreign language that seemed to him to have some similarity to Latin and Italian. He wished most fervently to know the language, for the book pleased him exceedingly without his understanding a syllable of it. It had no title but as he looked through it, he found several pictures. They seemed wonderfully familiar to him, and as he looked more sharply, he discovered a rather clear picture of himself among the figures. He was startled and thought he was dreaming, but after looking at it repeatedly, he could no longer doubt the complete similarity. […] The last pictures in the book were dark and unintelligible; still several figures of his dream struck him with deepest ecstasy; the end of the book seemed to be missing Henry was greatly distressed and wished for nothing more fervently then to be able
to read the book and to possess it all together. (Novalis, Henry Von Ofterdingen, 90)99

The book embodies all Heinrich’s yearning for poetry. It is written in a language he does not understand (like the signs described by Zulima); it is open ended (like the quest of the old miner). The youth is left with a handful of inconclusive figures. No one is able to explain what he sees and there is nobody he can ask. The book becomes an inner experience not translatable in another language. The only real thing, so to speak, is the glyphs on the pages, the words of the unknown language. In the first five chapters of the novel Novalis builds a dense web of images that mirror each other. Heinrich’s journey proceeds through a progressive repetition of figures that constantly appear to approach a moment of revelation that does not happen.

When in chapter six the journey finally comes to an end and Heinrich reaches his mother’s hometown, the reader’s expectations are unsettled. Where is the blue flower? What happened to the original image from which everything started? In the sixth chapter Heinrich meets the great poet Klingshor, a master

---

99 Endlich fiel ihm ein Buch in die Hände, das in einer fremden Sprache geschrieben war, die ihm einige Ähnlichkeit mit der lateinischen und italienischen zu haben schien. Er hätte sehnlichst gewünscht, die Sprache zu kennen, denn das Buch gefiel ihm vorzüglich, ohne dass er eine Silbe davon verstand. Es hatte keinen Titel, doch fand er noch beim Suchen einige Bilder. Sie dünkten ihm ganz wunderbar bekannt, und wie er recht zusah, entdeckte er seine eigene Gestalt ziemlich kenntlich unter den Figuren. Er erschrak und glaubte zu träumen, aber beim wiederholten Ansehen konnte er nicht mehr an der vollkommenen Ähnlichkeit zweifeln. Er traute kaum seinen Sinnen, als er bald auf einem Bilde die Höhle, den Einsiedler und den Alten neben sich entdeckte. […]. Die letzten Bilder waren dunkel und unverständlich; doch überraschten ihn einige Gestalten seines Traumes mit dem innigsten Entzücken; der Schluss des Buches schien zu fehlen. Heinrich war sehr bekümmert, und wünschte nichts sehlicher, als das Buch lesen zu können, und vollständig zu besitzen (Novalis, Ofterdingen, 91)
storyteller, a man that could finally unravel the mystery. Glyph and hieros will perhaps meet each other.

3.3 The Unfulfilled Erwartung and the Sublime Erfüllung

My reading of Novalis’ novel has been, thus far, focused on how the author develops a dialectical narrative based on the idea of hieroglyph. This idea is represented by a twofold movement of the text. On one hand there are promising signs (the glyph), on the other hand the meaning (the hieros) is delayed and constantly displaced and scattered in a multitude of other signs and images, by playing on both their allegorical meaning and their metonymic proliferation.

The blue flower is the first hieroglyph we meet. The first five chapters of Heinrich Von Ofterdingen are built through an expansion and repetition of the flower’s signifying structure. Yet, the flower somehow disappears or, better, is displaced in a chain of images and meta-narratives. At the beginning of the sixth chapter, when Heinrich reaches his destination, we are forced to ask the question: what’s the purpose of the blue flower? Does it have any purpose at all? And if so, when will it be revealed?

Once in his mother’s hometown, Heinrich meets two key figures: the great poet Klingshor and his daughter Mathilda. From chapters six to chapter nine we read about Heinrich’s acquaintance with the poet and his sudden, almost unexplainable, love for Mathilda. In fact, Heinrich shows more interest toward the father rather than to the girl. All his imagination is aroused by Mathilda being the daughter of such a great poet. The two youth spend time together
doing all the things we have seen done by the “fictional” characters in the meta-narratives: they play music; they talk about poetry, about love, and the immortality of the soul; they sing together; they teach each other what they know. Heinrich and Mathilda seem to reenact a screenplay that has been already written. Novalis is once again placing before the reader something familiar in a different shape. Yet, their love was expected to be somehow the answer to the reader’s expectations. Upon meeting Mathilda, Heinrich thinks:

Do I not feel as I did in that dream when I saw the blue flower? What strange connection is there between Mathilda and the blue flower? the face which inclined to me out of the flowery calyx, that was Mathilda’s heavenly face, and now I also remember having seen it in the hermit’s book. But why did it not touch my heart so deeply then? Oh! She is the visible spirit of a song, a worthy daughter of her father. She will dissolve me into music. She will be my innermost soul, the vestal priestess of my sacred fire. (Novalis, Henry Von Ofterdingen, 104)

All of a sudden, Heinrich realizes that the blue flower is Mathilda. This would seem to lead to a sort of closure: perhaps, all along, the blue flower was nothing but a token for love, the driving force that led a young man to meet his soul mate. Yet, something is wrong. Heinrich’s “epiphany” is troubled by two questions: what is the strange connection (sonderbare Zusammenhang) between Mathilda and the flower? Furthermore: if she is the blue flower, why wasn’t Heinrich’s love aroused when he saw the flower in his dream? There seem to be no definitive answers, but Heinrich feels that she is a worthy daughter of such a

father (eine würdige Tochter ihres Vaters) and that she will dissolve him into music (Sie wird mich in Musik auflösen). That is why Mathilda is to Heinrich an encounter with poetry. The blue flower is almost arbitrarily associated to her without any inner necessity. The youth's love for the girl is in fact the love for everything that is creative and that might be of inspiration to him. Mathilda appears as the vehicle to make Heinrich closer to her father, the great Klingshor, whom he regards as the depositary of the secret art he had been longing for since the beginning of his journey. It is not by chance then that the “last words” of the first part of the novel, Die Erwartung, are Klingshor’s. The long fairy tale that constitutes the ninth chapter in its entirety is the a final meta-narrative through which Novalis puts an end to the “expectations” of the reader.

The story is long and extremely complex. A detailed plot summary would be indispensable here just to touch the surface of the intricate symbology and web of references that Novalis builds in this final part of the text. However, my interest is rather in the general function, at the level of the rhetoric, that the presence itself of a meta-narrative told by the authoritative figure of a recognized poet has in the economy of the novel. Like the previous stories, “Klingshor’s tale” is, but not exclusively, about the formation of a poetic language. Everything revolves around the conflict between Fable, a young girl able to write on a magical paper, and an adult scribe capable only of a more traditional writing. The jealousy of this latter triggers a series of events that will ultimately lead to the demise of the scribe and to the birth of Fable as a magical singer. More importantly, the conclusion of the tale is also the conclusion of the first part of the
novel. There is no going back to the main narrative. Novalis closes this section of
the novel casting an almost definitive shadow on the reader’s expectations of
seeing the blue flower’s meaning revealed. There is a strong parallelism with the
beginning of the novel.

In the opening paragraph we are presented with the fictional aftermath of
a story told by a stranger of whom we ignore everything but one detail: there
was a blue flower. At the end, we are presented with a tale characterized by a
hypertrophy of images and details and we are left with neither an explanation
nor a description of the effect the story has on the listeners. There is both a
reversal of the situation that opens the novel and a circular movement that closes
the narrative in what we can visualize as a hieroglyphic construction. To
understand my point and, I believe, the originality of Novalis’ operation, we may
find some aid in a graphic representation.
At the beginning and the end we have two stories. The blue flower stems from the stranger’s tale and unfolds its petals into a narrative made of intertextual references, meta-narratives, and symbolic continuity. I divided the central part of the novel into three main sections: Heinrich’s initial dream, the stories Heinrich is told by his fellow travelers, and Heinrich’s main storyline. In the diagram I refer to a few of the parallelisms that tie each section to the other. The three big chunks of the story, so to speak, are united by the repetition of similar objects and places. In all three sections we are presented with images of either unreadable languages or unspeakable thoughts. The enigma of the blue flower contaminates the rest of the narrative. The stories should be able to fill the semantic void of the upper part of the diagram. They should be able to answer the question regarding
the blue flower. Instead, as we have seen, with the appearance of Mathilda the novel presents again the blue flower as a stand-alone symbol apparently disconnected by the imaginative chain it had previously triggered (Heinrich sees the flower in Mathilda but is uncertain why he wasn’t able to feel love before). The novel converges into a final meta-narrative that leaves the reader suspended again in a semantic void. The relationship that Novalis designs between signifier and signified, image and meaning, is based on approximation and separation. Like in a hieroglyph, the visible sign reveals and obscures its hieros at the same time. The repetitive pattern allows Novalis to build a strongly visual text that ultimately stands alone as a writing on a slab; as an unreadable language inside a ribbon; as a forgotten book into an eremite’s cave. The repetition of signs and images sets up the expectation for an allegorical meaning to be unveiled. The repetitive patterns seem to point toward a consistent model that slowly will be unraveled. This Erwartung is deluded and the only thing happening in the text is the endless shaping of stories. Heinrich’s journey is endless like its narrative. The break that occurs between the two sections of the novel points toward this circularity of the rhetorical structure of the text.101

At the beginning of Die Erfüllung, the reader is presented with a long song by a female singer Astralis, presumably the offspring of Heinrich’s and

101 How does one find the whole in the parts and the parts in the whole?/ The inessential must be treated only as the medium, as that which connects – hence only this integrating and forward-leading characteristic must be marked out./ Not one superficial word is permitted./ We stand now only at the beginning of the art of the writer/ (Novalis, Fichte Studies, 182). At a rhetorical level, ”the beginning of the art of writing” also refers to this constant going back of the text to its inceptive movement; its repetitive staging of beginnings and new openings.
Mathilda’s union. The song is a sort of coincidentia oppositum; it is about loss and rebirth, mourning and hope, and it throws the reader into a completely different setting. Heinrich is now a pilgrim who still has not found the destination of his journey. Something has happened in the blank space that divides the two sections of the novel; something inexpressible. How did Mathilda die? Did they have a child? Did Heinrich find at least momentarily what he was looking for? The semantic void is the direct consequence of the circular structure I described in the diagram above: Heinrich’s journey is a movement from story to story, from image to image, from language to language. Any question regarding the purpose of the text has become, to use DeMan’s expression, “questions that may deny the very possibility of asking.”102 Heinrich, like the reader, has stopped wondering about the meaning of his journey. The quest for a definitive resolution has resulted in no gain. Through his pilgrimage Heinrich gains awareness of his own conscience as the only basis of his life. The blue flower has been displaced and scattered in multiple directions. The end of his story is nothing but the beginning of another one.

The awareness of this endless cycle, the conscious perception of the never-ending pilgrimage of the subject through narratives, figures and indecipherable signs is the only possible fulfillment, the only given Erfüllung. In the short second part of the novel, after the opening song of Astralis, we see Heinrich singing alone in the woods (a familiar image by now). He meets a girl who seems to know him and brings him to a cabin where an old man is waiting for him. At

first, Heinrich appears to recognize in him the old miner. This man, called Sylvester, claims to know Heinrich’s father and states he is his mentor. Heinrich admits to not have received any training toward a specific profession and the two men thus begin to talk about childhood and education. Heinrich is looking for an answer to a question he does not know how to ask. His journey has led back to an old man, reminiscent of past acquaintances, who challenges him with a final problem. The final dialogue between Sylvester and Heinrich reflects the structure of the entire narrative. The reader, like the protagonist of the novel, is forced to ask one question: what is left to gain in this journey, once all hopes for a definitive meaning are gone? The answer is in one word: consciousness (Gewissen). This is the crucial moment of the novel that brings together all the threads we have observed unraveling so far. It is in fact a common critical place to argue about the unfinished nature of the novel in terms of a Romantic fragment. The fact that the novel lacks a proper ending as far as closure is

---

concerned does not mean that it leaves its general design unaccomplished. In fact, at the end of the second part of the novel, Novalis ties the idea of Gewissen to the experience of the sublime. The consciousness Novalis depicts is the self-awareness of the poetic activity of the subject and of the nature as a never-ending transfiguration.

"Upon me, to be sure," said Sylvester, "living nature, the active vesture of a region has always made the deepest impression. In particular, I have never grown tired of minutely observing the various kinds of plant life. Plants are the most immediate language of the soil. Every new leaf, every unusual flower is some kind of secret pressing forth and turning into a quiet voiceless plant because it is too full of love and joy to move around and utter words. When one finds such a flower in solitude, does it not seem as if everything round about were transfigured and as if the little feathered songs preferred to linger in its neighborhood? One could weep for joy and in detachment from the world just bury one's hands and feet in the earth, in order to take root and never leave this happy spot. This green mysterious carpet of love is drawn over all the dry land."  

104 Martha Helfer reads the novel as part of a general design which ultimately leads to the Hymns to the Night. In this sense Heinrich Von Ofterdingen is not considered as unfinished but rather as accomplished chapter of a larger narrative telling the story of the development on Novalis’ poetics (Helfer, 90-105). For a different reading see A. A. Kuzniar. Delayed endings: nonclosure in Novalis and Hölderlin. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987 p. 122-132 The author reads Novalis’ novel in messianic terms. The text is considered as an unending fragment prefiguring a truth yet to be revealed.

105 Auf mich, sagte Sylvester, hat freilich die lebendige Natur, [329] die regsame Überkleidung der Gegend immer am meisten gewirkt. Ich bin nicht müde geworden besonders die verschiedene Pflanzennatur auf das sorgfältigste zu betrachten. Die Gewächse sind so die unmittelbarste Sprache des Bodens; Jedes neue Blatt, jede sonderbare Blume ist irgend ein Geheimnis, was sich hervordränget und das, weil es sich vor Liebe und Lust nicht bewegen und nicht zu Worten kommen kann, eine stumme, ruhige Pflanze wird. Findet man in der Einsamkeit eine solche Blume, ist es da nicht, als wäre alles umher verklärt und hielten sich die kleinen begeiferten Töne am liebsten in ihrer Nähe auf. (Novalis, Heinrich Von Ofterdingen, 120)
The image of the flower rises again. Sylvester’s speech closely reflects the speech of the old miner. In both cases the interest in nature is dictated by a curiosity for the different forms and shapes nature assumes and not by any practical interest. The reemergence of the flower in this specific context is a warning signal. The unfulfilled allegory of the first part of the novel has now taken a new shape, has become the vehicle of another story, of a new association of images and events. Heinrich considers flowers as symbols of childhood, as symbol of the fresh spring of a yielding earth. The flower is no longer an allegory, but the subject itself. Its power of permutation, its cyclic life of birth and death, represents to Heinrich life on earth in its entirety. On the contrary, the clouds in the sky are “the manifestation of a second, higher childhood (die Erscheinungen der zweiten, höhern Kindheit).” Heinrich has finally come to see the whole world not only as a mutating flower but, I suggest, as a big hieroglyphic construction.

Here, on earth, there is the glyph of the childhood, the flower of men able to change forms and transfigure everything that stands around. There is the hieros of a higher childhood, that is of a higher ability of transforming the real. The here and there are synthesized in the body of Heinrich that stands on the earth looking at the sky. His figure becomes a hieroglyph of the sign here and now and its higher meaning there and then. Sylvester continues:

There is certainly something very mysterious about the clouds, [...] and a certain cloud formation often affects us very wonderfully. They move along and with their cool shadows try to pick us up and take us with them. And if their formation is beautiful and gay like a wish our soul has breathed out, so too their brightness, the glorious light that then reigns upon earth, is like the foretelling of an unknown, ineffable glory. But there are also gloomy and grave and terrible overcloudings that appear to pour with all the terrors of ancient night. Then it appears as though the sky will
never clear up; the bright blue is wiped out, and a pale copper red against a dark-grey background awakens horror and fear in every heart. Then when the destructive bolts flash down, and with mocking laughter the crashing thunderclaps follow them, we are frightened to our very depths. And if the sublime feeling of our moral dominion does not well up within us then, we believe ourselves handed over to all the terrors of hell, to the power of the evil spirits. These are the echoes of a primitive inhuman nature, but also summoning voices of a higher nature, of heavenly conscience in us. The mortal part rumbles in its deeps; the immortal begins to shine brighter and comes to know itself. (Novalis, Ofterdingen, 164)

A Kantian echo should resound loud and clear. Novalis presents the reader with a description of the clouds that merge together Kant’s description of the ocean on one hand, and that of the ambivalent feeling of the sublime on the other. The passage is based on binary oppositions all revolving around the central image of the formation of the clouds. Novalis uses the word Bildung that means image, construction and figure. The clouds can either express glorious light (das herrliche Licht) or the terrors of ancient nights(der Schreken der alten Nacht).

The image of the clouds is ambivalent. Their shapes can be a sign of night or light. The clouds express opposites without being exclusively one or the other. In

---

106 Es ist gewiss etwas sehr geheimnisvolles in den Wolken, sagte Sylvester und eine gewisse Bewölkung hat oft einen ganz wunderbaren Einfluss auf uns. Sie ziehen und wollen uns mit ihrem kühlen Schatten auf und davon nehmen und wenn ihre Bildung lieblich und bunt, wie ein ausgehauchter Wunsch unser Innern ist, so ist auch ihre Klarheit, das herrliche Licht, was dann auf Erden herrscht, wie die Vorbedeutung einer unbekannten, unsäglichen Herrlichkeit. Aber es gibt auch düstere und ernste und entsetzliche Umwölkungen, in denen alle Schrecken der alten Nacht zu drohen scheinen. Nie scheint sich der Himmel wieder aufheiter zu wollen, das heitre Blau ist vertilgt und ein fahles Kupferrot auf schwarzgrauen Grunde weckt Grauen und Angst in jeder Brust. Wenn dann die verderblichen Strahlen herunterzucken und mit höhnischen Gelächter die schmetternden Donnerschläge hinterdrein fallen, so werden wir bis ins Innerste beängstigt, und wenn in uns dann nicht das erhabene Gefühl unserer sittlichen Obermacht entsteht, so glauben wir den Schrecknissen der Hölle, der Gewalt böser Geister überliefert zu sein. (Novalis, Ofterdingen, 122)
between of the opposites there is “the sublime feeling of our moral dominion” (das erhabene Gefühl unsrer sittlichen Obermacht). The sublime emerges here as the awareness of the power over light and darkness, over the multitude of forms the clouds can take on.

Yet, the clouds were previously defined as a “higher childhood,” a flower capable of transforming everything around. What is it then the relationship between the sublime feeling that the clouds bring forth in the subject and the definition of the subject as a transmuting spring of the earth? The gateway to the answer is “the sublime feeling of our moral dominion,” which Sylvester discloses to Heinrich as Gewissen, consciousness. The sublime feeling that protects the subject from the fear of the cloudy skies is self-awareness. The final question that needs to be answered is what kind of self-awareness the feeling of the sublime represents. The answer is of an aesthetic nature and has to do with the ability of the subject to understand his place in the never ending evolving of forms, images, and words.

The blue flower has presented Heinrich with the mystery of consciousness, deluding all its previous promises. The flower was not Mathilda, it was not a secret poetic artifact, it was not even an allegorical figure. The flower was the image of childhood as a creative stage of human evolution. The flower allows Heinrich to perceive himself as the spring of earth, as a standing figure between a steady and secure ground and a cloudy and frightening sky: a flower stemming from the soil and bending to the different winds. Heinrich discovers that consciousness is the awareness of being in the middle space between
possible worlds, transfigurations and metamorphosis. Sylvester states that the end of evil in the world will happen “when there is only one power, the power of conscience. When nature has become modest and moral. There is only one cause of evil, common weakness; and this weakness is nothing but meager ethical perceptivity, and lack of charm in freedom” (Novalis, Henry Von Of terdingen, 163-164).  

To understand Sylvester’s definition of Gewissen we need to slightly adjust the translation to find some remarkable correspondences between this passage and what we have discussed at the beginning of this section on Novalis. The weakness is literally a “low moral receptivity” (geringe sittliche Empfänglichkeit) and it must be understood in light of the previous description of “our moral feeling of dominion” (das erhabene Gefühl unsrer sittlichen Obermacht). Moral receptivity and moral dominion are one thing. The subject’s ability to perceive his dominion over the fear caused by the changing forms of nature is the essence of consciousness. Being receptive to his own power is the prerequisite for the subject to develop his consciousness. The weakness of consciousness is defined by Sylvester as “Mangel an Reiz der Freyheit” which literally means lack of stimulus in freedom.” Reiz is in fact the same word we found in the philosophical fragment analyzed at the beginning of this chapter (where Novalis defines allegory as Reiz for the novel), in the old miner’s speech

---

107 Wenn es nur Eine Kraft gibt – die Kraft des Gewissens – Wenn die Natur züchtig und sittlich geworden ist. Es gibt nur Eine Ursache des Übels – die allgemeine Schwäche, und diese Schwäche ist nichts, als geringe sittliche Empfänglichkeit, und Mangel an Reiz der Freiheit (Novalis, Heinrich Von Of terden gen, 122).
(after discovering the manifold forms of metal the miner has no Reiz to gain any
practical advantage from the metal), and now Reiz is what determines the
accomplishment of consciousness. Novalis builds a web that ties together
different moments of his writings. The ability to be receptive to stimuli, to feel
inspired and not be frightened by the fluctuant shapes of the world, enables the
subject to become self-aware of his own consciousness, that is, of his ability of
processing through the imagination what seems to escape his comprehension.
The moral dominion, over what appears as endless and incomprehensible, is the
awareness of the ability of building ingenuous webs of figures that make the
unpredictable and unforeseeable forms of the clouds more accessible to the
imagination.

This dominion is a sublime experience for being a higher level of
consciousness beyond the empirical, possible only through the acceptance of the
intermediate position of the subject between earth and clouds, metaphorically
intended: the earth of where one securely stands and the clouds that obscure
what one is not able to see. The sublime feeling of dominion allows the subject to
understand the folds between different worlds; to see the shaping of universes
and languages; to stand in the middle of the stormy turmoil of forms. The power
of consciousness is to see everything like one language, one world that while
diversifying itself, remains the same. Sylvester continues:

The universe breaks down into an infinite number of worlds, each in turn
contained by larger ones. In the end, all minds are one mind. One mind
like one world gradually leads to all worlds, but everything has its own time and its own manner. (Novalis, *Henry Von Ofterdingen*, 165)\(^{108}\)

In Heinrich Von Ofterdingen, the sublime becomes a gate to the poetic power of a subjectivity standing among possible worlds. The subject perceives itself in the flowing not only of words and images, but also of worlds and their history. The necessity of the life here and now and the infinite possibilities of the real there that have not yet happened, becomes one unified stream of consciousness in the subject’s poetic imagination. The glyph here and the hieros there approximate each other.

At the end of the journey the sublime becomes the awareness of the possible worlds that human languages can create. What was a rhetorical strategy becomes an insight into the nature of the work of art and of its creator. Like Heinrich, the reader finds out that “the sublime feeling of moral dominion” is the perception of his own place in the chain of images and possible transfigurations that the world always presents.:

[Heinrich] I only know that for me fable is the all purpose tool of my present world. Even conscience, this power which generates the universe and meaning, this germ of all personality, appears to me to be like the spirit of the world poem, like the accident of the eternal, romantic confluence of the endlessly changeable totality of life. [Sylvester] Worthy pilgrim conscience appears in every serious completion, in every embodied truth. Every inclination and skill which reflection turns into a world image becomes a phenomenon, a transmutation of conscience. Indeed all development leads to what can only be called freedom regardless of the fact that thereby not simply a mere concept but the

Heinrich realizes that his journey was the discovery of his tool, his fable. Gewissen is the awareness that every figuration (Bildung), metamorphosis (Verwandlung) is nothing but an endless “romantic confluence” (eine romantische Zusammenunkunft). Every reflection of the subject is considered as Weltbild, an image of the world and thus as a product of the subject’s consciousness. In this sense, the whole world is intended as poetic construction of the subject. The “sublime feeling of moral dominion” is the awareness of the subject’s ability to create, of his power of dominating the totality of life through the “tool of fable.”

Poetry and storytelling are not only what the novel is ultimately about, but is what the subject is expected to create in the “endless convergence” of

---


110 Here we can hear the echo of Fichte: “The productive imagination creates the material for representation: it alone shapes everything that is found within empirical consciousness and is the creator of this consciousness itself. But even in regard to its productive power, the imagination is still no thing in itself; instead it is a capacity of the only immediately given things in itself: the I. Accordingly, even the creative power of the I must have a higher basis within the I, or expressed differently and in a way more appropriate to our inquiry: though the productive imagination may be for consciousness a creator, for the I as such it can only be a shaper (Bildnerin), and what it shapes must be found within the I” (Fichte, Early Writings, 193).
images that the text itself of Heinrich Von Ofterdingen has created by a sophisticated use of what I have defined as a rhetoric of the hieroglyph: a constant interplay of allegorical instances and imaginative displacements. Like Heinrich, the reader must be able to build a Weltbild of the novel, to see the text as a totality of transfigurations of which the Fable, the narrative, is the vehicle of representation.

Through the novel Novalis reworks the Baroque problem of the allegory from the Romantic perspective of the sublime. The allegorical tendency to unify the alterity of the sublime into a normative image is unfolded by Novalis into a narrative structure that makes the allegorical and the sublime two sides of the same coin. The sublime becomes the awareness of the never-ending quest for a Weltbild (an image of the world)\textsuperscript{111} and the acceptance that every image is a complete and yet transitory world. Heinrich’s awareness of his journey as one Weltbild among many possible world images, empowers him with the self-

\textsuperscript{111} On the importance of the Romantic idea of Weltbild in the contemporary philosophy see Martin Heidegger. \textit{The question concerning technology, and other essays}. New York: Garland, 1977.
awareness of the poetic nature of life: the only truth is the sublime feeling of
dominion over life as a fable, over nature as a novel.\textsuperscript{112}

Ultimately, the journey of Heinrich Von Ofterdingen defines a new image
of the reader. The subject who reads the text must be able, like Heinrich, to
understand his dominion over the plurality of forms, and his place within the
text as one transfiguration among others. Novalis builds a textual machine which
gives the illusion of a meaningful pattern, of a hidden design behind the totality.
The awareness of this self-deception is the sublime feeling that allows the reader
to observe the novel as figures on a slate, “wie Figuren auf einer Tafel,” and to
step into the narrative path as if walking inside a building constantly redesigning
its exteriors: every image contains another image and every sign reflects its
opposite. The power of the reader is in the last instance the same power that
Novalis bestows upon the artist.

In one of his philosophical fragments, Novalis looks at the development of
human knowledge as characterized by a conflict between scholars and poets: the
first are logical thinkers that believe in abstractions, and the second are animated

\textsuperscript{112} As Lacoue-Labarthe writes: “If fiction and the figure thus belong to
philosophy and have always belonged to it; if there is no theory of fictioning in
general that is not fundamentally included in the very system of the most
“primitive” philosophical oppositions […], this in no way prevents this fictional
order from having been the occasion or the pretext for a certain displacement
that, without destroying this system of oppositions (it is indestructible) or
breaking the deep bond between the fictional and the theoretical (it is
unbreakable), nevertheless has posited the fictional in a different (displaced)
relation to truth by dissociating it, at least up to a certain point from the
problematic of veiling and unveiling. This displacement is difficult to measure, if
not to perceive. For the place where it occurs is very precisely everything that, in
the eighteenth century is called aesthetics […]” (Lacoue-Labarthe, Subject of
Philosophy, 151).
by a mystical belief in the existence of one unifying spirit in nature. Novalis regards the first as “micro” thinkers for being concentrated on the logical necessity of every single aspect of the world. The second are instead regarded as “macro” thinkers for reflecting on the world as a whole, a dynamic totality. At a rhetorical level, the opposition is between a vision of the work either as a totality or as a cluster of different individual images. As we have seen, Novalis creates a narrative entirely structured around this opposition which can be resolved only by advancing to a third stage beyond scholars and poets: the stage of the artist. Novalis writes:

The ascent to the third stage is achieved by the artist, who is at one tool and genius. He finds that this original division of absolute philosophical activities is a deeper division of his own being-whose survival rests on the possibility of its meditation-it combination. He finds that, no matter how heterogeneous these activities are, there is nonetheless a capacity within himself to move from one to the other, to change his polarity at will. Thus he discovers in them the necessary elements of his spirit, he perceives that both must be united in a common principle. (Novalis, Philosophical Writings, 49-50)¹¹³

From a feeling of overwhelmingness and of inadequacy, the sublime is turned by Novalis into the identity itself of the artistic subject. The reader is empowered with the same ability of oscillation. The awareness of the self-deception of the allegory, of the higher purpose beyond one’s self, is what frees the subject from

¹¹³ A similar idea is expressed in the Fichte Studies: "All being, being in general, is nothing but being free - oscillating between extremes that necessarily are to be united and necessarily are to be separated. All reality radiates from this light-point of oscillation - everything is contained in it - object and subject have their being through it, not it through them. I-ness or productive power of imagination, the oscillating - determine, produce the extremes between which oscillation occurs - This is a deception, but only in the realm of ordinary understanding. Otherwise it is something thoroughly real, because the oscillating, its cause, is the source, the mother of all reality, [is] reality itself. (Novalis, Fichte Studies, 164)
the constraints of the forms and what turns him into the master of these very forms. If it is true, as Novalis writes, that “being a complete I is an art” it is also perhaps true for its reversal, that to be a complete art means to be an ‘I,’ a transitory construction of images. Yet, like Novalis, by reiterating the use of “perhaps” and of dubitative adverbs this ‘I’ here and now that tries to put an end to this dissertation is nothing but one of the thousands of possible transfigurations that, through art, strives to become a complete ‘I.’ The critical discourse and the sublime share as a matter of fact this aspect: they both respond to a limit of the imagination. The sublime rises from the recognition of the infinite possible worlds around us, and the critical response to a literary text is the attempt to approximate the very moment of creation of that text. As Kant writes, the feeling of the sublime, of being overwhelmed by something that goes beyond our own imagination is in fact the result of our “attempt to involve ourselves in it by means of the imagination” (Kant, Judgment, 151). The perception of the limit is already what makes the imagination soar beyond itself by forcing the subject to think of himself in front of the infinite, of what can not be reached. The linguistic attempt to articulate this vision is an aesthetic gesture that makes it possible for the subject to attain an illusory completeness: to become a complete “I” for the length of a fable, of a novel, of a song or, as in this case, of a critical excursion in the realm of someone’s else writing.
CONCLUSION: THE PORCUPINE

I set before you a product, into which I believe I have breathed a few Ideas. But I do not give you the ideas themselves, nor can I do so. I give you the mere body. The words which you hear constitute this body. Taken in themselves, my words are no more than an empty noise, a movement in the air which surrounds us.

Fichte

Friedrich Schlegel once wrote that “a fragment like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine.”114 The image of the spiky little animal should by now be familiar to us, being the core figure of what in the first chapter I discussed as the perfect impresa in Tesauro’s Aristotelian Telescope. What can we make of this coincidence? Can a porcupine tell us something about what binds together Baroque and Romanticism? Can we look at it as a mirror of the new idea of reader and subjectivity that develops from the theory of conceit to the idea of sublime? In order to answer these questions we need to momentarily step back and recapitulate what so far has been told.

In the introduction I stated that this dissertation began with my indulging in what Benjamin called the “temptation” of seeing what Baroque and Romanticism have in common. From my own part, I argued that Romanticism should be observed as a development of rhetorical problems originating from the crisis of the institution of allegory in the 17th century. Throughout the three chapters I have shown how the semantic void left by the allegory originated

hybrid forms of representation based on the interplay of words and images. The Baroque impresa, Vico’s frontispieces, and Novalis’ theory of hieroglyph are three responses to the problem of the new relationship between work of art and subjectivity caused by the crisis of the institution of the allegory and, in general, of normative theories of art. From the Baroque conceit to the Romantic Sublime we witness the formation of a new modality of representation of subjectivity. The “I” of the reader/viewer is inscribed within the confines of the work itself through a subtle net of figures of speech and visual strategies aimed at narrowing the distance between work and self. From Baroque to Romanticism we see the growth of techniques aimed at designing the figure of an ideal reader/viewer called to redefine his own experience of art. The ideal reader is a subject able to read the work of art according to his own poetic ingenuity, thus foregoing any attempt of exegesis. By self-representing its own making, by constantly showing its own nature of artificial construction, the work of art presents itself for what it is, a work, thus leading the subject to gain insight into his own creative powers. The progressive display of the gears that compound a text is aimed at drawing the subject within the work on one hand, and to push him beyond itself on the other, by forcing him to create his own individual path in the text following the intuitions of his own ingenuity. For each work I focused on those meta-critical figures that show the conflict each text enacts between the search of authoritative images and the poetic drive toward the displacement of such images; between what a text seems to say and what it shows through its rhetoric.
The temptation to read Baroque and Romanticism together led me to the conclusion that the Baroque can be read in critical terms and the Romanticism in light of the traditional rhetorical structures. The two approaches complement each other and show how from Baroque to Romanticism the creation of the theory was always rooted in a figurative, rhetorical, or narrative praxis where the visual and verbal reciprocally define each other. The theory of conceit and that of the sublime are two forms of insight into the subject’s poetic nature: by building a new model of textual experience, and thus a new modality of reading, Baroque and Romanticism redefine the aesthetic nature of subjectivity, called to not simply interpret the work, but to make the work a temporal device through his own poetic creation, creating forms able to transform an old work into a new one.

In the first chapter I argued that the impresa should be regarded as the gateway to a new representation of subjectivity. The aesthetic function of the impresa is to present the subject with a new space of poetic creativity. Through the contemplation of the synthetic and dense form of an image and a motto, the subject is pushed to explore the ingenuity not only of the figure but that of the mind that created it. As we have seen in Tesauro, the interplay of words and images is a vehicle through which the creation of poetry itself is revealed. This process of revelation is based on a chiaroscuro dialectic between visual and verbal elements which constantly struggle to reciprocally illustrate each other. The theory of conceit is a response to the separation of signs and meanings that occurs in Baroque poetry and painting. The goal of the conceit is to make the
creative subject the center of his own understanding, being his poetic ingenuity both the source and the goal of the artistic representation.

In the second chapter I argued that the works of Giambattista Vico represent a threshold between the Baroque idea of conceit and the Romantic idea of sublime. I have shown how Vico turns the idea of poetic ingenuity into the epistemological foundation of the New Science. The ability of creating and understanding conceits enables the reader of the New Science to design his own path through the web of metaphors and meta-critical images that Vico scatters throughout his text to represent the making of his philosophy. The discourse is structured for and through the work of the reader. By representing the building itself of the New Science, Vico puts the reader in the middle of the process of signification pushing him to poetically read the text or, in other words, to give up the expectations for a linear development of the philosophical text and to take on the challenge of a text where the philosophical truth relies on the reader’s ingenuity to compare (bring together) different images in a unifying aesthetic intuition. The truth is to Vico ultimately revealed and accomplished by the reader’s intuition of the secret bond that ties all the different images of the text. In this sense, I argued that the whole text of the New Science works as a conceit, as an impresa, because its final goal is to lead the subject to overcome both verbal and figural representations in favor of an aesthetic intuition of the ingenuous identity of the truth. In this regard, I contended the traditional scholarly vision of either a Pre-Romantic or a Baroque Vico: instead I argued how the conceit enables the experience of the sublime and how the intuition of the sublime
reworks the antithesis of words and images in the Baroque conceit. I argued that in order to design this ideal trajectory from conceit to sublime, Vico designed within his text the model of an ideal reader that is progressively educated through meta-critical images, repetition and variations of similar metaphors, to read the text according to two opposite but complementary modalities: geometrical synthesis (embodied by the figure of Euclid) and ingenuous imagination (exemplified by the figure of Daedalus).

In the third chapter I argued that Novalis’ novel Heinrich Von Ofterdingen represents the development of the Baroque idea of conceit into the category of sublime intended as a textual experience. The sublime becomes a literary construction which requires a redefinition of the role of the reader and of his poetic consciousness. In my reading I argue that Novalis builds a rhetoric based on a dialectic between allegorical illusion and poetic delusion: the novel is organized around a pattern of repetitions and intra-textual references that constantly increase the reader’s expectations for a meaning of the novel to be revealed. These expectations are unveiled as an illusion by the proliferation of poetic images that progressively deconstruct the allegorical symbology. I argued that this hiatus between meaning and poetic sign is expressed by Novalis’ idea of hieroglyph: the image refers to an invisible meaning, but the invisible meaning is not reflected in any definite image, being displaced in a metonymic chain of different figures. The novel is a rhetorical conundrum which traps the reader between the extremes of the poetic ingenuity and the intuition of an abstract meaning. The idea of sublime becomes the recognition of the intermediate
position occupied by the subject between the present experience of the text and that of the all possible texts. The interplay between poetic ingenuity and tendency toward an allegorical meaning that never shows itself determines a grey zone where every image becomes the reflection of each other; a middle position where the rhetoric of metaphor and that of metonymy coexist in an endless process of substitution and displacement. Instead of translating a meaning, every metaphor replaces (substitutes) an image with another image and all the replaced images are not erased from the text, but moved somewhere else (displaced) and they constantly re-emerge to expand the semantic and visual web of the text. We have seen this happening in the figure of Mary Magdalene that loses her sacred attributes only to reveal them in the disguised form of earthly tokens of human passion; we saw this happening in Vico’s image of Daedalus and Euclid, emended from the New Science but yet displaced in the praxis of a writing alternatively labyrinthian and geometrically precise; we observed the same phenomenon happening in Novalis, where the blue flower is substituted by multiple images and then displaced in the final image of the cloudy sky.

To go back to our initial question then: why then the porcupine? The porcupine symbolizes the working of the Baroque art as a gesture made of both attraction and repulsion, approximation and distance; it reflects Vico’s metaphysics that through a constant interplay of visual and verbal strategies requires the reader to see both from a distance and from a close point of view; it mirrors Novalis’ writing that while drawing the reader close to its meaning, at
the same time it pushes him endlessly further away: the more the meaning of an image appears to come closer, the faster the text reveals that meaning to be only a rhetorical illusion. The Baroque conceit, Vico’s New Science, and Novalis’ theory of hieroglyph share this characteristic with the porcupine: they attract the subject with their uniqueness to then repel him with their impenetrability. In resisting the subject’s urge to touch, the porcupine reveals to be, as Schlegel says, something complete in itself. Yet, if the porcupine was not separated from the rest of its surroundings, if it did not allure us with its unique look, we would not notice it, we would not be attracted to it and tempted to grasp it with our hands. Its perfect isolation makes it attractive to the point of accepting the risk of a damage, of being rejected and pushed away.

The Baroque and Romantic description of the porcupine are complementary. The three “cases” that I explored in this dissertation, and that represent to me three seminal moments of the modern definition of art and subjectivity, have exerted on me the power of attraction and rejection. I was drawn to them and then dismissed by their apparent completeness, by their being a self-sufficient organism that almost refused any intrusion, any protruding hand toward their beautiful and dangerous spikes.

As Novalis writes, “totality is a too general concept.” there is always something left outside. Even the idea of completeness in itself, as we have seen, is a rhetorical illusion determined by a complex and sophisticated interplay of different linguistic levels and by new hybrid forms of representation involving verbal and figurative signs. In the dialectic between words and images,
hypotyposis and abstract reflection, the work of art opens a new space for the vision of the subject’s creative power. The work of art’s illusory completeness triggers the reader’s and viewer’s ability to poetically appreciate the work as an endless production of aesthetic forms: every given form of a work contains the seeds of the form that it might have been and the form it will take in its temporal evolution. The more the subject gets close enough to grasp the work, the more the work itself outdistances him. This process of constant approximation is what defines the aesthetic experience as theorized and represented in both Baroque and Romanticism.

Finally, the porcupine could ultimately be seen as a meta-critical figure of this dissertation. The completeness of my work relies on the rhetorical effect of persuasion that my arguments have been able to produce. After all, as I stated already in the introduction, this completeness is somehow a postulate that can only be revealed as illusory given the diversity of the material presented. I found myself in the middle of being attracted and rejected, of approximating and being at the same time outdistanced.

This work is meant to be a piece of criticism in a Baroque and Romantic sense. First, it is grounded in the Baroque belief that the experience of art is always limited and made possible only by the rhetoric and imaginative construction of texts and images. Second, this dissertation could never be written without the belief in the Romantic idea that every form of criticism implies a redefinition of the ‘I’ and that every discourse always mirrors how a subject reflects on his own way of understanding, thus providing the reader with the
representation of a particular way of building associations. Oscar Wilde wrote that ‘every work of criticism is an autobiography.’ This dissertation is perhaps the testimony of something more than a scholarly research, and it is in the shadow of some surplus of meaning that this work may function like a porcupine.

In nature, the little spiky animal is known for always building two entrances at the opposite ends of his lair: this dissertation could then be read from Baroque to Romanticism and the other way around, from left to right and from right to left, as a continuity of forms. The point of departure was only nominal and arbitrary. As Novalis has shown us, writing and reading are an endless return to the beginning, the reshaping of the origin in different forms. At the end, the porcupine is closing in on itself, falsely complete, and ready to be unfolded again by the criticism and self-representation of another imaginative mind, of another “I” giving in to the same temptation that set this journey in motion.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Battistini, Andrea, and Ezio Raimondi. *Le Figure Della Retorica*. Torino: Einaudi, 1990.


Fubini, Mario. *Stile e umanità di Giambattista Vico*. Bari: Laterza, 1946.


Sini, Stefania. Figure vichiane: retorica e topica della Scienza Nuova. Milano: LED, 2005.


