

A Temple in the Ear

Chapter 1

*The Steps to Parnassus*

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Translated by

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The poetic creation and the dream experience are interconnected. Literary matter and dream matter have in common two structuring processes: condensation and dislocation. Condensation is the essential process within poetry, and to characterize this process within dreams Freud employed the term *Verdichtung*, a word deriving from the root *Dichtung*, which is precisely the German word for *poetry*. But to this act of synthesis, implied by the term condensation and uniformly shared by both activities, is added the act of dislocation or defocusing the object of the narrative, whether poetic or oneiric, so as to produce an assertion that is *indirect* or contrary to fact, if one adopts a realistic model of representation. Therefore, the poetic creation and the dream experience have in common the capacity to produce polysemic narratives, subject to an indefinite number of interpretations.

From the topographical point of view, the essential difference between both activities is that dreams are integrally a product of the Unconscious while Poetry is only partially so. Thus, while the dream is only partially the result of the Conscious, the poem is for the most part a conscious act of *homo faber*, to the extent that if the dream is not the act of *a* dreamer the poem is the construction of *a* poet, which the latter directs and controls. The eventual intervention of the dreamer in the dream is nonetheless unconscious and therefore incommensurate with the intentional act of the poet.

While the goal of a dream is the satisfaction of a desire, even if it may not appear on the surface of the oneiric narrative (it is revealing that the most adequate vocabulary we have to speak of dreaming is that of literary theory), the goal of a poem is the production of a verbal object. Therefore, it has as a condition of its existence and bears upon itself the sublimation of desire in a manner that makes its denial tolerable or at least a deferred gratification.

Whereas in other languages such as German the terms *poetry* and *poet* are used in the sense of a primordial art of verbal communication, which includes both poetry and prose, in Romance languages the term *poetry* has come to signify exclusively a form of art whose objects are poems, generally lyric poems. But “poetry” in the Aristotelian sense includes both epic poetry and drama. And since the epic genre evolved into the novel, a prose genre, the primitive concept of poetry also includes prose genres.

For the sake of simplicity, instead of referring to poetry in its most comprehensive sense, I prefer to use the term *literature* to denote the whole comprised by lyric poetry, drama in prose or poetry, and prose narrative, the latter of which includes genres within it such as the novel and the short story. In these terms poetry and prose are not two distinct art forms, but rather a single and unique art with a unique and identical objective: to reveal experience, reflected in its linguistic representation. In fact, their only difference is procedural, in the sense that the construction of the literary object is accomplished in the novel and narrative through a process of decomposition, or analysis, while in poetry this construction is achieved through a process of condensation, or synthesis, and under these circumstances the short story becomes a form of poetry.

Therefore, *literature*, understood as including prose and poetry, has the task of taking us to the edge of the inexpressible. The underlying problem resides in the fact that verbal language,

whose art is Literature (in the sense that the art form of sound is Music), functions within strict limits. It follows that language is incapable of fully representing the full measure of experience, in that there is a part of experience that is linguistically, and therefore literarily, unrepresentable. I classify as inexpressible precisely this domain of linguistically inaccessible experience, and the grandeur that surrounds the art of verbal language can be precisely measured by its capacity to convey the reader to the intuition of that domain, even though a description of it is impossible. For the moment, I offer Rainer Maria Rilke's "Eighth Duino Elegy" and James Joyce's "The Dead" as examples of literary art that possess this capacity.

It bears mentioning that one sees the use of the term "inexpressible" in theoretical comparisons of the representative power of literature and music, in general advocating for the latter the power, which is denied to literature, of representing the inexpressible. In this sense Music is also able only to demonstrate but never describe the inexpressible, even if the example given is Bach's *Mass Great Fugue of the Mass in B Minor*. The ubiquity of Music throughout the arts, however, is one of the great theoretical achievements of the end of the nineteenth century, and nothing expresses this better than the phrase "All art constantly aspires to the condition of music" by the English novelist Walter Pater, a milestone in the history of musical prose.

Music stands out among the arts mostly because the *form* of the work of musical art is not a *sensation*, an immediate given of the senses. Data obtained by the auditory senses must be structured into a form, from the simplest, such as the rondo or the minuet, to the most complex, such as the sonata or the fugue. This is how one explains the amply verifiable fact that a person who doesn't *comprehend* the form of the sonata cannot *hear* it. Thus, the physical component of

the work of musical art bears an abstract message that is not in itself an immediately perceived object, but one that would be indefinable without recourse to the physical component.

Regarding the denotation of musical expressions, one must observe that musical expressions do not denote objects, and it is for this reason that they do not describe them, but rather denote universal truths or concepts. Therefore, in the case of the presumed representation of objects such as the song of the nightingale in Beethoven's *Sixth Symphony*, what is in truth represented is the abstract essence of the nightingale's song, its structure, and not the song of the nightingale itself. Under these conditions Music does not represent the things of the world but rather their structures. It is in this sense that Richard Strauss notes that it was Mozart who revealed to the world the nature of the human soul, or its essence, when he created the Mozartian melody, such as is found not only in his dramatic music but also in his instrumental music.

Since all art aspires to the condition of Music, the fact that the entire world is Sound and that at the subatomic level vibration is a fundamental property, perception plays a crucial, if semiconscious, role. This perception, which is now semiconscious, was entirely conscious in another period of Western culture, beginning with the Orphic and Pythagorean writings and where the thesis that matter is vibration was the factor that linked cosmological, religious, and philosophical systems. The end of the Middle Ages brought the end of *auditory man* and the imposition of a new visual culture, with the subsequent creation of a new kind of dominant perception, that of the *visual man*. One of the consequences of this shift is that the awareness of the loss and the pain caused by the deformation imposed by the visual culture is expressed, as in Walter Pater, by a desire to return to the auditory world, such as can be accomplished by Music. This is the *esthetic* avenue, but by no means the only one, to compensate for the deformation.

Music can be used as a symbol of the internal experience of harmony by constituting precisely the most obvious instrument able to tear off the veil of the visual illusion to which we have been bound since the Modern Era. Modern man and woman are alienated from the essence of the world, as well as their own, for having lost consciousness of having been the victim of a *second original sin*, that is, the undermining of the world of hearing. But it happens that visual perception is less acute and less reliable than auditory perception, and that the ear is the most acute organ of perception. Thus, the awareness, if only partial, of this catastrophe creates the desire to return to that which Walter Pater calls the “condition of music.”

Most philosophers of art currently view the problem of the value of the work of art with skepticism. The prevailing trend is either the simple elimination of value or its substitution by a concept such as “cognitive efficacy,” thought to be more meaningful than the concept of value judgment. I am opposed to this kind of pragmatism that determines that a work of art lacking in cognitive efficacy to be of no value. The value of the work of art, and in particular the work of literary art, is its meaning and, in this sense, my value judgment is essentially the same as a semantic characterization of the work of art. In the semantic theory adopted here the concept of meaning is defined at the expense of the concept of polysemy (i.e. the number of interpretations), so that the meaning of a work of art, and of the work of literary art in particular, is essentially the number of interpretations to which it gives rise.

A first consequence that results from this definition of the value of a poem is the need to think of the poem as essentially the proposition of an enigma. And since an enigma is not an assembly of facts, or an account of that assembly, nor is its value a given or an assembly of givens apparently enclosed within the enigma. In general, one can think of the enigma and the poem in particular as a communicational state whose archetype is the Oracle. As the most

elementary example we can conceive of an Oracle that expresses itself through an enigma whose polysemy allows *two* equally probable interpretations.

To hear one's interior life, to hear the ocean of one's interior and exterior life, is the new function of the reorientation of consciousness that follows the discovery of visual man's illusion. This discovery is especially difficult to attain because the dominant culture is the culture of visual sensation. One is *conditioned* to think of an experiential datum as a fact, and that everything begins and ends as visual sensation. In reality, the visual sensation is merely a metaphor for the representation of the act of knowing, and in no way the description of its content.

This spiritual calamity, which conflates a visual metaphor with experiential content, equally infects the language of spiritual traditions of a broader scope in which the vocabulary of the interior life has been built on a model of visual sensation. In the Eastern tradition, for example, a fundamental postulate is the existence of an organ with access to supreme consciousness. This is usually represented as the "third eye," or the faculty of "third vision." The object of knowing is also represented by a spatial, and therefore visual, metaphor as being Emptiness, such as one finds in Buddhism, the perception of which reveals that the cognitive subject possesses the faculty of "*Insight*." The word appears by juxtaposing "*sight*" with "*in*," and the crucial substantive is analogous to "vision." The state of consciousness to which this experience leads one is described as a state of "*Illumination*," and the historical figure of Buddha, traditionally described as "Illuminated."

The Judeo-Christian traditions of the Old and New Testaments mistakenly elevate the visual sense when they portray all of the experience of the knowledge of God in visual terms. The height of the spiritual experience in this tradition is the "vision of God" and to "see God

face-to-face,” and “to be a visionary,” one who “has visions,” interpreted as gifts that God bestows on some of his creatures. Some persons become adept through “visualization” exercises, for which Saint Ignatius of Loyola compiled a list of rules and procedures that have as their goal the *efficient* exercise of visualization.

The prevalence of the visual sensation metaphor to represent the act of knowing is in a way surreptitious in that even that poet who dedicated a portion of his message to the demystification of the value of sight described sight as a trap. I refer to Rilke, who in the crucial passages of his *Eighth Duino Elegy* eventually succumbed to visual vocabulary, making yet again the eye as the organ of vision, which is the supreme knowledge of what he calls the Open. In all other passages of the *Elegies*, particularly the first, as he explores the themes of sound, voice, hearing and silence, he consecrates the role of auditory perception as well as an auditory formulation of the terms he calls “Empty” and “Open.”

In the great spiritual traditions mentioned the realm of hearing remains, and within the Eastern tradition the expression “Nada Brahma” reveals the presence of a countercurrent, within which the supreme experience is auditory. The “third ear” replaces the “third eye,” and Sound is analyzed on three different levels of accessibility. On the first through third levels the sounds can be heard by all, by some, and by no one, respectively.

In the Christian tradition, the first two levels are the basis of the passage of the Gospel according to Mark, according to whom Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and then Sidon and came to the Sea of Galilee where his people brought a deaf-mute man for Him to cure. Jesus took him aside, placed his fingers in the man’s ears, and uttered “EPHAPHATA,” whose meaning is “Be opened.” The man’s ears opened, and he was able to speak.

To determine the resonance that poetry has exerted throughout the history of humankind, one must know who these humans are, that is, to whom do we refer when we say “humankind.” *Prima facie*, one would be given to suppose that the term would refer to all humans. Experience shows, however, that persons who read Poetry and allow that their lives be influenced by the reading of Poetry comprise a declining minority, without any statistical relevant validity. Above all, this small declining minority does not coincide with that group of persons who have created History, even when we limit ourselves to Western culture. The distinction between the creators of History and readers of Poetry grew to such an extent after the French Revolution of 1789 that since that time the creators of History, now professionalized into political parties, managed to establish themselves as an elite focus of public and private life. Under these circumstances Poetry has no impact on the formation of History and, truth be told, struggles to maintain a precarious and unjustifiable existence, evidence being innumerable essays on the generic topos, or theme of, “The Decline of Poetry.” To reverse this slide, it would be necessary to achieve what I shall call “Musil’s dream,” which would mean the elimination of politics from public and private life.

But we are very far from satisfying Musil’s dream, and all evidence points to the opposite, since the corruption of public and private life is now an irrefutable fact. The most extraordinary thing about this evolution is that politicians, as a professional class, have been repeatedly defined as a *demimonde*, where the numbers of them who either live on the edge of or cross into crime keep growing. The moral and spiritual decadence to which this phenomenon leads is clearly visible in the institutionalization of cynicism, an attitude that reveals itself in most of us today when it is assumed that what a politician says is likely untrue.



The institutionalization of cynicism allows politicians not only to lie, sell arms to both sides of a conflict and authorize the destruction of Nature, but above all it has made possible the greatest falsification of modern consciousness, with which one willingly substitutes economic groups in place of the State and leisure in place of Culture. In the *Ring of the Nibelung* tetralogy, Richard Wagner concludes by formulating the hope that the daughters of Reno, who symbolically survive the collapse of the world of money, constitute a new nucleus for the resurrection of Nature and of Love. The real tragedy is that in the meantime the daughters of Reno were killed by pollution and Nature as a whole slowly dies a little more each and every day. As for us, all we can do is count the days.