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# Symbol and Allegory: From Goethe to Lukács, from Marx to Benjamin

Romano Luperini

## 1. GOETHE

As is well known, the distinction between symbol and allegory becomes sufficiently clear only at the end of the eighteenth century. It is in August and September of 1797, on the occasion of an epistolary exchange with Schiller, that Goethe begins to articulate the different characteristics of each of them. The fortune of symbol and misfortune of allegory, lasting almost without interruption up to the present day, have their beginnings then—and this is perhaps not an insignificant detail—at the threshold of the modern era.

In the aphorisms of *Maxims and Reflections* we read:<sup>1</sup>

It matters a great deal whether the poet is seeking the particular for the universal, or seeing the universal in the particular. The former process gives rise to allegory, in which the particular serves only as an instance or example of the universal; the latter, on the other hand, is the true nature of poetry, it gives expression to the particu-

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lar without in any way thinking of, or referring to, the universal. And he who vividly grasps the particular will at the same time also grasp the universal, and will either not become aware of it at all, or will do so long afterwards.

That is true Symbolism in which the particular represents the universal, not as a dream or a shadow, but as a living, instantaneous revelation of the Inscrutable.

Allegory transforms the phenomenon into a concept, the concept into an image; but in such a way that in the image the concept may ever be preserved, circumscribed and complete, at hand and expressible.

Symbolism transforms the phenomenon into an idea, the idea into an image, in such a way that in the image the idea still remains unattainable and for ever effective, and, though it be expressed in all languages, yet remains inexpressible.

In his *Prolegomena to a Marxist Aesthetics* and *Aesthetics*, Lukács turns to these maxims on a number of occasions, emphasizing their anti-romantic and classical charge. He focuses his attention above all on the difference between the *concept*, proper to allegory, and the *idea*, proper to the symbol, and, in a more oblique fashion, on the notion of "inexpressibility" that characterizes the symbol. While the *idea* is the "synthesis of a totality," because it confers on the image both the content of the phenomenon, with its vital richness, and its ideality, the *concept* is only a "fixed and univocal reflection, dis-anthropomorphic, abstracted from objective reality," because it goes beyond its sensible immediacy without preserving it and indeed locks the separation between perception and rational content into an irremediable dualism. As for "inexpressibility," this, in Lukács' reading, would only allude to the inexhaustibility of the real, to the "intensive and extensive infinity of real objects," and thus to the necessary inadequacy of all languages.<sup>2</sup>

If Lukács is undoubtedly correct in pointing out the strong classical tendency of the Goethean theoretical perspective (and, as we will see shortly, other arguments can be added to support this claim), his concern to distance Goethe's reflections from the romantic sphere prevents him from grasping their full range of implications and, specifically, from investigating the question of the "inexpressibility" of symbolic figuration.

According to Goethe, in the case of the symbol, the poet *sees* in the particular the universal; in the case of allegory he *seeks* the

particular in function of the universal. The opposition *see/seek* (in the German text: *schaut/sucht*) implies two different operations: one tied to the sense of vision, perception and intuition (in the etymological sense of the term as well), the other to investigation and reflection. In the first case one finds the truth immediately, without seeking it; in the second a process of research is necessary, because there is a distance between the particular and universal that must be overcome (and there is no guarantee that this research will be successful). The first is instantaneous, the second presupposes duration in time. The symbol presents itself as a unity of appearance and essence which perception grasps concretely and simultaneously; allegory, instead, is subject to their division, and because of this requires the moment of abstraction and chronological succession. The latter is defined through the abstraction of a concept extraneous to the appearance, the former through the sensible perception of the idea that appears in the object. Because of the coincidence between perception and the revelation of truth, consciousness and will are not involved in the symbol, whereas in allegory awareness and rational detachment are indispensable. While the symbol—transforming the phenomenon into an idea and the idea into an image—captures the limitlessness of the whole through an intuitive act and can therefore never demonstrate it adequately, so that it “remains inexpressible,” vice versa allegory, transforming the phenomenon into a concept and the concept into an image, can express the truth that is proper to it without residue, because this truth remains limited (“circumscribed”), referring not to a total and natural meaning but rather to an intellectual one that is subjective and conventional. In sum: the reason for the “inexpressibility” of the symbol has to do with its very nature, which is to say with its intrinsic epistemological modalities, not so much, or not only, with the nature of language and with the inexhaustibility of the real, as Lukács interprets it.

From this point of view, Goethe’s position may have an element of more than casual affinity with romantic theories, however different from them it is, sharing with them the nexus of perception-appearance-essence, itself declinable either in the direction of classicism or of modern symbolism. Obviously Goethe has in mind the classical plasticity of the symbol, the unity of the ideal and appearance. In the twinkling of an eye, in the instantaneousness of a glance, in a moment (as, not by chance, in the German, *Augenblick*), the infinitude of perfection takes place. But the

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momentary totality of the symbol can also assume—as in Novalis, and in the exact same year, in fact the same months—a magical and mystic dimension. When Novalis claims to grasp through the symbol the profound and impalpable link that brings together nature and interiority in a unitary whole and declares in *Hymns to the Night* that “Rivers, trees, flowers, animals, everything had a human sense,”<sup>3</sup> we are already at the beginning of a line of thought that will lead to the Baudelairian theorization of the *correspondences*. Modernity will entail a movement away from the organic harmoniousness of classicism, the progressive autonomization and dissociation of sensible perception, the exasperated refinement and progressive specialization, as it were, of the perceptive capacities of the senses, with a dual and in some way divided consequence. On the one hand, as diverse sensorial capacities gradually develop in the arts, the necessity emerges to invent a language for lyric poetry that is adequate to them and thus ever more special and sectorial, ever more inclined to reflect upon itself, and thus highly phonosymbolic and allusive—it is the tendency towards linguistic self-reflexivity that asserts itself at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, both at the theoretical level, in the studies of linguistics and poetics, and in the literary practice of symbolism and post-symbolism.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the natural or metaphysical totality that such a linguistic and poetic specialization apparently signals loses all possibility of plasticity and concreteness and is actually asserted with a force and stubbornness commensurate with its vagueness. If the intuited whole is increasingly remote and inaccessible, if nature itself tends to be presented in poetry as the imitation of a nature that no longer exists, or exists less and less (in Italy, D’Annunzio’s imitation of nature is exemplary), the originary theological essence of the symbol is turned upside down in a paradoxical religion: that of an art which, claiming to have the capacity to grasp a whole which, beyond it, is by now out of its reach, is reduced to admiring itself. The link between aestheticism, specialization and linguistic self-reflexivity, and the imitation of a natural or metaphysical entirety that is perceptible with ever greater difficulty, is the abiding trait of modern symbolism. And *Kitsch* is organic with it.<sup>5</sup>

We are clearly quite far from the classicism of Goethe. And yet the accord between poetry and life that symbolism and modern aestheticism presuppose undoubtedly finds in Goethe an important antecedent. His insistence on the “inscrutable,”

"unattainable," "inexpressible" (*unerforschlichen, unereichbar, unaussprechlich*, in German) character of the symbolic revelation of the whole and on the involuntary nature of such perception already signals a first consistent split with respect to the "realism of the Enlightenment" to which Lukács unilaterally attempted to lead him.

In fact, at the basis of the Goethean theory of the symbol as the immediate perception of the whole and the coincidence of appearance and essence, one finds a concept that is extraneous to Enlightenment culture, that of *Erlebnis*, or of lived, authentic experience. It is *Erlebnis* that guarantees the unity between poetry and life. For *Erlebnis* presupposes "the whole immediately"; its meaning, Gadamer observes, is "infinite."<sup>6</sup> *Erlebnis* is a "moment of infinite life" and in its instantaneous and immediate character

at once detaches itself from the continuum of life and is in relation with the totality of lives of everyone. . . . In the measure in which it belongs to the totality of life, the totality of life is present in it.

In short, to that coincidence of particular and universal proper to the symbol corresponds that coincidence of the concrete moment of individual experience and the totality of life in *Erlebnis*. And poetry is precisely the expression of such unity.

In his definition of the symbol, Goethe alludes more than once to the fusion of particular and universal in the vital concreteness of experience: it is a question, he writes, of grasping the "living" richness of their unity ("he who vividly grasps the living particular will at the same time grasp the universal"), and it is by such a path that the "living, instantaneous revelation of the Inscrutable" will be made possible. In these statements—and Lukács clearly stressed this forcefully—a polemic against the early romantics is evident, and perhaps against Novalis himself, for the particular must be "living," must take place in all its concreteness and "not as a dream and shadow." However, it is in these same statements that theory of *Erlebniskunst* already begins to appear, and which, carried to the extreme and free from Goethean classicism, will run its full course in the era of romanticism and symbolism. Gadamer rightly concludes:

The criterion of the lived, of *Erlebniskunst*, that Goethe himself instituted, became the dominant axiological concept in the aesthetic field in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

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## 2. LUKÁCS

According to Lukács, the importance of Goethe within the sphere of literary history lies in the fact that in proposing "a contemporary classicism," he forms "a bridge between the realism of the Enlightenment and the grand realism of the first half of the nineteenth century."<sup>8</sup> In the sphere of literary theory, then, Goethe—as we read in the *Prolegomena to a Marxist Aesthetic*—would have been the first to see "in particularity the structural category of the aesthetic sphere"<sup>9</sup> and to articulate art's capacity to grasp the universal in the particular, thus anticipating the theory of types as the mediation between phenomenon and essence. In *Aesthetics* Lukács not only underwrites the Goethean distinction between symbol and allegory and the devaluation of the latter in favor of the former, but declares that such a theory of the symbol appears to him substantially in agreement with the Marxist theory of "realistic art."<sup>10</sup>

The line of continuity is clearly to be found in the category of totality as the unity of phenomenon and essence, perceived, as Goethe would say, "without becoming aware of it." The Lukácsian notion of the "triumph of realism"—extrapolated from a letter of Engels'—presupposes a particular "honesty"<sup>11</sup> on the part of the writer, that of forgetting himself and his own ideology: unconsciously and almost involuntarily, obeying the logic of his own creation, the writer thus obeys the logic of objective reality, of its sense and development. The problem does not so much lie in admitting a discrepancy between the consciousness of the author and his aesthetic productions (among other things, as noted in modern aesthetic theories, in art that which has been displaced by the individual and repressed by society comes to the surface). It lies rather in the fact that this dissociation comes to be posited as the foundation of a theory of the reflection of the totality, which is to say of a consciousness capable of grasping the meaning of the entirety of an historical process. Whereas Goethe conceives of a natural whole, of the man-world unity that can be perceived by intuition, the Lukácsian concept of totality slips from the natural and ontological level to the socio-historical.

In fact, in the 130 years that divide these two different theorizations, the dissociation and specialization of modernity have already brought about drastic divisions in the theoretical imaginary. In place of the concepts of intuition and perception, Lukács substitutes that of reflection, seeking then to annul the risks of

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passivity inherent in this concept by postulating the mediating category of the particular and the typical: the latter, in fact, occurs only in the presence of a "taking a position" with regard to humanity's greatest problems. The question of how such "taking a position" can be reconciled with the artist's "honesty," with his forgetting himself and his ideology, may at this point seem an unresolved theoretical contradiction. We will briefly see that this is not really the case. For the moment, let it suffice to note that the risk of such a contradiction could not exist instead in Goethe, who remained constant in his ontologico-natural conception of totality, where obviously the problem of "taking a position" and, to an even greater extent, of awareness and thus of the rational and abstract moment, could be so much more easily denied or ignored. The problem lies in the fact that Lukács wants to preserve for art the same characteristics of naturalness, spontaneity and superior honesty that belong to every *Erlebniskunst* (and it is precisely such a theoretical orientation that safeguards him from any risk of Zdanovism), but then his *Erlebnis* passes from the level of the relationship between self and nature, self and the world, to that of the relationship between subject and society. The universal itself becomes in Lukács the "social universal." The type is still Goethe's "living particular," but in it converge the social traits of an historical epoch:

The type is characterized by the fact that in it converge and intertwine in a living, contradictory unity all the salient traits of that dynamic unity in which true literature reflects life: all the most important social and moral and psychological contradictions of an epoch. . . . In the figuration of the type, in typical art, concreteness and the norm are fused, the eternal human element and the historically determinate, individuality and social universality. For this reason, in the creation of types, in the presentation of characters and typical situations, the most important tendencies of social evolution find adequate artistic expression.<sup>12</sup>

In short, with Lukács it is necessary to speak of a new type of *Erlebnis*. It entirely consists in the refusal of Flaubertian *impassibilité*, in the participation in the social, in taking a position. Such "participation" seems to be the necessary condition of "honesty" with which the writer, whatever his specific levels of political and ideological consciousness, succeeds in reflecting the global process of history. It is this, in short, which guarantees the possibility of distinguishing between the essential and non-essential, mere accidental singularity from the particularity that contains the uni-



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versal within it. "Participation" thus becomes the true and authentic experience by which the great writer is "spoken" and thus induced—even despite himself—to see the essence in the multiplicity of phenomena. Only through "participation" does the mediation of the particular offer itself. And it is here, in this specific form of *Erlebnis*, that the contradiction between the affirmation of the natural and spontaneous character of artistic creation and the necessity of taking a position with regard to the "great questions of human progress" is resolved. At this point it seems clear that "taking a position" is not to be understood in a political or ideological sense, but as a generic and yet totalizing ethical and sentimental attitude towards life. Thanks to the experience of "participation" and the consequent "taking a position," the writer places himself in contact with the most significant historical contents of his time and "with the true and profound dialecticity of reality," which then passes spontaneously into the logic of the creative work, despite the very political convictions of the author. Upon closer inspection, if the writer participates in the flux of historical reality, it is not so much he who chooses those contents (and it goes without saying just how important the content is for Lukács), as it is the contents that choose him. The circle of literature and life is thus confirmed. Again, it does not take place through detachment or intellectual abstraction: it is participation as *Erlebnis*, as "being part" of a whole, that is the site of mediation between phenomenon and essence and thus the guarantee of the just reflection of the totality.

The mediation of the typical thrusts itself upon the great realist-symbolist writer with a force which is at once natural and historical: the force of teleologism. History has already become the new nature and new metaphysics, and in fact takes their place. From this point of view Lukács' theory is also the objective reflection of a process set in motion by modernization (with the end of a "first" nature, and the birth of a nature which, wishing to be wholly human and historical, is instead wholly "artificial," etc.). In place of Goethe's classical organicism is substituted, without ruptures, that of the Marxist historicism of the period of the Third International. But while the former drew its historical legitimation from the horizon of pre-modernity in which it inscribed itself, the second ends up sharing many of modernity's many ideological illusions which prevent it from looking itself in the face (its historical teleologism, its theory of "progress," its faith in an objective truth that springs from the very flux of

events), at the same time it confronts modernity with a set of theoretical tools that is in many ways still pre-modern and thus incapable of seriously negotiating it.

The essay "To Narrate or Describe" brings to a maximum level of transparency the Lukácsian theory of social *Erlebnis* as the condition of an art that is both realistic and symbolic. Here the contrast between Scott, Balzac and Tolstoy on the one hand and Flaubert and Zola on the other is presented as the contradiction between *participation* and *observation*, and thus between two different ways of situating oneself in relation to life. In the first group the accidental is always transported beyond the realm of the incidental and into the realm of necessity; in the second it remains a mere descriptive detail, unmotivated both at the level of historical reality and at that of the corresponding narrative teleologism that should reflect it. In this case, too, Lukács' theoretical referent is a passage of Goethe's, in which the "fundamental quality of the living unity" is located in the fact that "the most particular event presents itself always as an image and symbol of the most universal."<sup>13</sup> Only the refusal of detached observation and participation allow the artist to attain such a unity and to obtain a dual result: with regard to style, the *narration* and thus insertion of the specific and accidental into the totality of reality; with regard to its effects, the insertion of the reader into the vital experience of art, his participation in its totality. "We live" the events "narrated" by Scott, Balzac or Tolstoy, writes Lukács; "we observe" those "described" by Flaubert or Zola.<sup>14</sup> Estrangement appears to be irreconcilable with realism. "Description" is nothing but the result of a detached, self-reflexive, abstract, "professional" attitude on the part of the writer under the constraint of social "solitude" and thus incapable of participating in the historical totality. The art of Flaubert and Zola is deeply marked by this lack of *Erlebnis*:

Flaubert and Zola . . . did not actively participate in the life of this society; nor did they wish to. . . . They can but choose solitude, and become observers and critics of bourgeois society. But with this they become at the same time professional writers, writers in the sense of the capitalist division of labor.<sup>15</sup>

On the one hand Lukács takes stock of the inevitable consequences of modernity at the social and aesthetic levels (the impossibility of "participation" and the commodification of art); on the other hand such consequences lead him to an unconditional con-

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demnation: the writer's acceptance of the capitalist division of labor, parceling out his existence and leading him to professional specialization, prevent him from participating in the totality of life and, robbing him of the possibility of a mediation of the typical, lead him either towards the flat imitation of the phenomenon (as with the naturalists) or towards the abstract admiration of the universal (as happens with the symbolist poets). It is here that we find the source of Lukács' radical incomprehension with regard to modern art. He remains a prisoner of his nostalgia for a pre-modern art, one still characterized by a primitive and scarcely specialized division of labor, by the harmonic organicity of the classical symbol or by the *Erlebnis* springing from a romantic participation in the rhythm of history. In this lies both the greatness of his utopian vision and his limit. His vision of the past was, as we well know, a dream for the future. But the divide that he marks out between *narrating* and *describing*, *participating* and *observing*, holds him back from the comprehension of an epoch and an art marked from top to bottom by commodity fetishism, by the discrepancy between signifier and signified, between the phenomenon and an essence ever more fleeting or actually nonexistent, by the accidental, the randomly singular, by the fragment in itself that is neither necessitated nor redeemed, and thus by the logic of allegory rather than by that of the symbol.

The theoretical refusal of allegorism in Lukács is the other side of his political refusal of the modern. He was of course by no means unaware that capitalist modernity irrevocably split appearance and essence off from one another, but he voluntaristically demanded that realist art succeed in overcoming this division (out of this too arises his discomfort with the second *Faust*, in which Goethe, needing to represent the reality of emerging modernization, must have recourse to allegory).<sup>16</sup> For Lukács, a world dominated by confusion and, at the aesthetic level, by the description of confusion must be radically refuted; it can only express an art that must have appeared to him, from one point of view, as an indirect apology for the situation created by capitalist development and, from another, a surrender to nihilism. Lukács does not see that modernization already denies any art that would have a realistic or cognitive value the possibility of *Erlebnis* and of *Erlebniskunst*, taking away any real basis it might have; and that the description of confusion is not necessarily, as Benjamin observes in the same years, "a confused description."<sup>17</sup>

## 3. MARX

Notwithstanding Lukács' assiduous reelaboration of the occasional notes on art that Marx and Engels left behind, it is impossible to make out a theory of the symbol or an organic vision of the typical as mediation between the singular and universal in these writings. The two founders of historical materialism limit themselves to stating their preferences in the field of drama and the contemporary novel for situations and characters that are typical insofar as they are capable of representing not only specific events and concrete individuals but, through these, social and historical conditions.<sup>18</sup> But they never state their views on the particular cognitive modalities of the aesthetic process as such. Rather they elaborated, above all in the economic writings (but not only in these), a theory of modernity that may also have interesting implications in the field of aesthetics.

For the later Marx, modernity is not a political phenomenon produced by the French Revolution, as he had maintained in his early writings, but rather an eminently social and economic process, begun some decades after it and characterized by the permanently innovative nature of big industry, by the progressive generalization of exchange value, by commodity fetishism, by the formation of a "second" artificial nature that takes the place of the first one. And yet, even though the commodity and its logic are unrivaled in their domination of the modern panorama, they do not "appear," they seem not to have a real, sensible manifestation. As is well known, for Marx the "enigmatic" and "mystical" character of the commodity<sup>19</sup> depend on the fact that its value, by now disconnected from its specific use values and the concrete labor that produced it, presents itself as "natural." The totality which takes the place of nature in the modern is not history, as in the thought of Lukács, but the "second" nature of the market.

In the commodity, the particular and universal no longer mutually convert into one another, for not only is there a difference between the product and the value, but—as Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*—an "antithesis" and a "contradiction."<sup>20</sup> Two somewhat paradoxical consequences result from this: on the one hand the gap within the commodity between appearance and essence presents itself as unbridgeable, so that its structure is intrinsically allegorical; on the other hand, the world of reification, offering itself as a "new" nature, also presents itself from an ideological point of view as the new site of a possible *Erlebnis*, so

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that the commodity, developing its enigmatic and mystical character that allows it to hide its material matrices, can reveal an "aura" and a sacrality and assume the characteristics of the symbol. On the one hand the division between "natural" (or "material") existence and the "economic existence" of the commodity is not an ideological illusion, and in fact there is a "real separation" between the reality of the commodity and its value,<sup>21</sup> so that its value can be arbitrarily and conventionally attributed and can allegorically transform itself—Marx writes—into a "mere sign, into a letter that takes the place of a relation of production";<sup>22</sup> on the other hand the "real separation" becomes the ideological reality, its concrete foundation, so that the particular value of the commodity, by now rendered autonomous of any of its concrete determinations, brings with it an immediate and simultaneous access to the universal, and, that is, to the whole of its "new" nature and value as such. The social origin of ideology does not lie in some maneuver of the ruling class but in this singular and extremely material inversion produced by commodity fetishism that transforms an allegorical reality into a symbolic one.

The Marxist theory of ideology is consubstantial with modernity, which is to say with the structure of the commodity, and is thus basically complementary to and homogeneous with the theory of reification. Appearance and essence together cease to exist. With modernity an epoch opens in which, at the level of consciousness, the only possible hermeneutic is that of suspicion. It is no longer possible to trust perception; estrangement is necessary, the moment of analytic abstraction. It is no longer possible to have access to totality naturally and spontaneously; on the contrary, ideological demystification is necessary, the inversion of the inversion. Meaning no longer naturally springs from the order of things and from the living unity of the whole, but can only be the inevitably partial result of an operation of inversion that is at once theoretical and practical, an operation that therefore pertains to the critique of ideology and of praxis, to the conflict of interpretations and to the lengthy process of research and struggle.

If the reality of modernity is the divided and allegorical reality of the commodity, it seems unlikely for it to be compatible with that harmonic co-penetration between particular and universal that was theorized by Goethe and that Lukács reposed as a still relevant model. Rather, the theoretical schema of the Marxist analysis of the modern themselves turn out to be quite different from, if not actually incompatible with, those of Lukácsian realism.

## 4. BENJAMIN

In the same year that Marx was studying and defining the modern in London, working "like a madman" on the *Grundrisse* (as we read in a letter to Engels of December 8, 1857), *Les fleurs du mal* appeared in Paris, in which Baudelaire represents the economic upheaval and dessication of interiority in that other capital of modernity, deriving from it the necessity of an allegorical choice at the aesthetic level:

Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville/change plus vite,  
hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel)// . . . Paris change! mais rien  
dans ma mélancolie / n'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages,  
blocs, / vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie, / et mes  
chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.

The German scholar of *Faust*, Heinz Schlaffer, juxtaposes these verses of Baudelaire with the passage in which Goethe refers to his theory of the symbol for the first time.<sup>23</sup> This is a letter to Schiller of August 16, 1797, in which, apropos of those objects which possess a symbolic value, he remembers "the surroundings of the house, the courtyard and the garden" of his grandfather in Frankfurt as they now appear, transformed by "shrewdly enterprising men" into "a business and market place" after the building had been destroyed by a bombardment.<sup>24</sup> Goethe's Frankfurt, in short, is like Baudelaire's Paris. But in Goethe, again, the symbol is linked to the act of seeing, that grasps an order of things that is both natural and reasonable, sentimental and social, private and public, without breaks: the estimation of the value of the building which, though reduced to rubble, "is still worth twice" that which his grandparents paid, does not produce an effect of alienation, but is inserted within the calm evaluation of an historical process governed by "wisely enterprising men," in which the author does not hesitate to recognize himself. Vice versa, Baudelaire registers a painful discrepancy between the time of interiority and that of the events that have overwhelmed Paris; everything becomes allegorical for him, because his condition is not one of the man who participates, but of an estranged man who, in his melancholy, does not perceive analogies, coincidences, but rather reflects upon—or "mulls over"—the divisions within an alienated reality.

The two texts, written sixty years apart from one another, bear the sign not only of two different artistic forms, but of two

different epochs. According to Benjamin, in the Paris of Baudelaire and of the *Passages*, with their *magasins de nouveautés*, with the lights of shop windows and commodities that replaced those of the stars, modernity was born, along with the art that was most true to it because it was most consonant with it and most capable of describing and knowing it: allegorical art. Nor can it surprise us at this point that Benjamin starts precisely from a critique of Goethe in order to set up, in the last chapter of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, his theory of allegory, and from a study of Paris and Baudelaire, deeply influenced by the first chapter of *Capital*, in order to establish the relationship between modernity and allegorism.

According to Benjamin, allegory for Goethe is not "an object worthy of reflection," and, indeed, his definition of it is only "a negative construction and after the fact" with respect to that of the symbol.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the history of romantic criticism that he outlines is there to demonstrate that Goethe is situated at its beginning and that, for this reason, the most radical opposition to classicism could not come from romanticism but rather from the baroque, its "majestic counterpart."<sup>26</sup> This observation of Benjamin's is all the more relevant if one considers that his interest for the baroque springs directly, as he himself admits at the end of the "Epistemological Preface," from his interest in twentieth-century expressionism, so that in point of fact the baroque presents itself to him as an allegory of avant-garde or modern art.

In sum, Benjamin also implicitly discloses a continuity between classicism and symbolic romanticism to which he counterposes the break represented by the line running from the baroque to expressionism: both the baroque and expressionism, for instance, do not conceive of art as a spontaneous and natural process, but *will* art (Riegl is present in these reflections), fully aware of its abstract and artificial character. Nor is this a merely literary concern of Benjamin's. The political matrix is evident and has been rightly noted by Cases:

Just as, in the baroque, allegory freed the necessity of transcendence from the slough of the transient, so modern art calls up from the dead world of reified things and men that utopia which Benjamin in those years identified with the Marxist classless society.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, modern allegorism, as practiced for the first time by Baudelaire, while reflecting the meaninglessness of economic

alienation and being, so to speak, consubstantial with it, does not limit itself to being a passive homology of it, but directs its "destructive fury" against its appearance of totality, developing the moment of rational and critico-negative consciousness to the fullest.

This negative limit, highly evident in Benjamin, and it is instilled in his investigation, as it were. His denunciation of the idealistic historical optimism and classical organicism implicit in the theory of the symbol is the very basis of his interest in the baroque, in Baudelaire, in avant-garde art, which, it must be said, he never posits as exemplary models. He does not brandish *mots d'ordre*, and his militancy privileges the destructive moment over the constructive. At the same time, within his perspective, no tradition is exempt from barbarism, as each is to be read against the grain. He does not overlook the vanity of the baroque contemplation of vanity, and thus warns the reader of the "danger" of falling into its "frightful abysses," inviting him to avoid identification, to remain the "master of oneself" and to maintain the self-reflexive and "detached attitude" of the allegorist.<sup>28</sup> As for Baudelaire, the French poet seems to him so much a prisoner of the horizon of reification that, as we read in *Das Passagen-Werk*, the questions put to him by the tribunal of history would appear strange and incomprehensible to him.<sup>29</sup> And in another aphorism, commenting on a passage in which Baudelaire defines as "magical" the stones of the Parisian *pavé* and of the barricades of '48, Benjamin, himself accused of magical tendencies, observes à la Brecht that they can appear magical only because the poet lacks the necessary knowledge and "makes no mention of the hands that move these slabs of stone."<sup>30</sup>

Benjamin is not thinking of an art of the future and thus, in contrast to Lukács, does not need to hypostasize some tradition as a model for the future. He knows that allegory is a form of writing belonging to a condition of imprisonment, the report of an inferno, valid not insofar as it anticipates within its framework the traits of a new society, but insofar as it rips off masks, deconstructs false totalities, denounces a void. Its message for the future is simultaneously bound and limited to the postulation of a meaning beyond meaninglessness and to the faith in human reason to think it; but it has no guarantee, for the split between the *ordo rerum* and *ordo idearum* is, in the allegorical vision, constitutive. In Benjamin allegorism is also a method of knowledge. Implicit in it is the awareness of the necessarily partial and frag-



mentary nature of every position and thus also of our own. There is no totality which can verify it. In the end it will be the capacity for knowledge and struggle that decides the result, the capacity, that is, to study phenomena and understand them in effective constellations of thought, effective so as to assert themselves within the conflict of interpretations and within social practice. But, in the meantime, it is important not to mystify the limits of one's prison.

It is no coincidence that neither the scientific nor idealistic tradition nor even the principal Marxist tradition have been interested in elaborating a theory of allegorism. Their penchant for the symbol is one with the essentialistic nature of the truth in which they recognize themselves.

Today, when the prison is more evident and the sense of limits and historical crisis inescapable, Benjaminian allegory returns with all the relevance of a radical and intrinsically dialectical thought. Neither essentialistic nor dogmatic, it is capable of freeing itself from the enchantment of appearances, and thus bears a theoretical perspective possessing a great advantage over the dominant tradition of symbolism. Yet it is also aware of its own poverty and capable of a continual critical vigilance over itself. Allegory always finds in itself, in its constitutive nature, the force to direct back at itself its own critico-negative charge. The inversion that it alludes to, signaling a possibility that cannot be reduced to a mere act of the intellect and which refers instead to a praxis and a future, indicates also the limit of denouncing this infernal condition while being a part of it.

The objection that Benjamin directs against Baudelaire holds true also with respect to ourselves. Inevitably, we too, in our work, move stones that risk appearing magical.

1. These aphorisms are 279, 314, 1112 and 1113 of the Hecker numeration, or 749-752 of that given by Hamburger Ausgabe, for which see *Goethes Werke*, Band XII: *Schriften zur Kunst, Schriften zur Literatur, Maximen und Reflexionen* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1973), 470-71. The English translation given here is taken from *Criticism, Reflections, and Maxims of Goethe*, W. B. Rönfeldt (ed.) (London: Walter Scott, 1897), 193-4, 180, 246.

2. See G. Lukács, *Ästhetik. I. Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen* (Neuwied am Rhein und Berlin: Luchterhan Verlag, 1963); It. trans., *Estetica* (Torino: Einaudi, 1970), I, 1475-76.

3. Some interesting considerations on the relationship between Novalis and symbolism can be found in P. Tortonese, "Inversioni dello sguardo. Gautier, Novalis e l'interiorità romantica," in *Rivista di estetica*, 31, 1989 (special issue ded-

icated to romanticism and poetry), 142-43.

4. Cf. F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 63-64.

5. On the relationship between aestheticism, imitation and *Kitsch*, see H. Broch, *Il Kitsch* (Torino: Einaudi, 1990).

6. Cf. H. G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1975); It. trans., *Verità e metodo* (Milano: Bompiani, 1983), 96-8.

7. Gadamer, 108.

8. G. Lukács, *Skizze einer Geschichte der neuen Deutschen Literatur* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1953); It. trans., *Breve storia della letteratura tedesca dal Settecento a oggi* (Milano: Mondadori, 1962), 52.

9. G. Lukács, *A különösség mint esztétikai kategória* (Budapest, 1957); It. trans., *Prolegomeni a un'estetica marxista. Sulla categoria della particolarità* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1957), 136.

10. G. Lukács, *Estetica*, 1476.

11. The theory of "honesty" was put forward a number of times by Lukács. It is expressed in a particularly clear fashion in the essay, "Introduction to the Writings on Aesthetics by Marx and Engels," in G. Lukács, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels als Literaturhistoriker* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1948); It. trans., *Il marxismo e la critica letteraria* (Torino: Einaudi, 1957), 50-51:

For truly great artists . . . reality, just as it is, . . . confronts their most fervent, intimate, personal desires. The honesty of the great artist consists precisely in the fact that, as soon as the development of a character comes to contradict the illusory conceptions for the love of which the character had taken form in the fantasy of the author in the first place, the author lets the character in question freely evolve to its extreme consequences, without at all caring that his most profound convictions thus vanish into thin air, because they are in contradiction with the true and profound dialectic of reality. Such is the honesty that we can find and study in Cervantes, Balzac, Tolstoy.

12. G. Lukács, *Il marxismo e la critica letteraria*, 43.

13. G. Lukács, *Prolegomeni*, 137. Goethe's citation is taken from *Ueber Naturwissenschaft*, but sandwiched between two other citations from the noted aphorisms on the symbol from *Maximen und Reflexionen*.

14. G. Lukács, *Il marxismo e la critica letteraria*, 282.

15. *Il marxismo e la critica letteraria*, 285.

16. Cf. for this observation, C. Cases, *Su Lukács. Vicende di un'interpretazione* (Torino: Einaudi, 1985), 133-6.

17. W. Benjamin, *Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main, 1955); It. trans., *Angelus novus. Saggi e frammenti* (Torino: Einaudi, 1982), 134.

18. Cf. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Scritti sull'arte*, C. Salinari (ed.) (Bari: Laterza, 1967), 160 (cf. also 156).

19. Cf. K. Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Oekonomie*, in *Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1974); It. trans., *Il capitale. Critica dell'economia politica*, in *Marx-Engels, Opere complete* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1970), I, 184-97.

20. Cf. K. Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Oekonomie (Rohentwurf) 1857-1858* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1953); It. trans., *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell'economia politica* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1968), 84.

21. *Lineamenti fondamentali*, 76.

22. *Lineamenti fondamentali*, 77.

23. Cf. H. Schlaffer, *Faust Zweiter Teil. Die Allegorie des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1985), 26-8.

24. *Briefwechsel Goethe-Schiller*, H. G. Gräf and A. Leitzmann (eds.) (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1912); It. trans., *Goethe Carteggio*, A. Santangelo (ed.)

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(Torino: Einaudi, 1946), 177.

25. W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963); It. trans., *Il dramma barocco tedesco* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), 168.

26. *Il dramma barocco tedesco*, 185.

27. Cf. C. Cases, postscript to *Il dramma barocco tedesco*, 277.

28. *Il dramma barocco tedesco*, 41 (cf. as well C. Cases' postscript, 278).

29. W. Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982); It. trans., *Parigi, capitale del XIX secolo. I "Passages" di Parigi* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), 473.

30. *Parigi, capitale del XIX secolo*, 468.