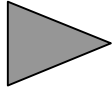# THE FIGURALITY OF LANGUAGE AND THE ILLUSION OF MEANING: ROUSSEAU, NIETZSCHE, AND DE MAN

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a deconstructionist perspective on meaning that is perfectly compatible with, yet utterly different from Derrida's antilogocentric "thesis" of the impossibility of a "transcendental signified": Paul de Man's conception of the disruptive and rhetorical nature of language. It analyses de Man's scepticism about the epistemological reliability of language, his indebtedness to the groundbreaking linguistic insights of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as well as his deconstructionist re-reading of their texts. It shows Demanian reading as perpetually incapable of distinguishing between the literal and the figural, and fascinated by the indeterminacy that turns texts into forever "unreadable" enigmas.
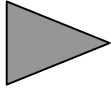
"The Figural Dimension of Language"

By virtue of their anti-metaphysical orientation, deconstructionists are highly sceptical about the possibility of an extralinguistic meaning, or what Derrida calls an "hors-texte", "a signified outside the text", or a "transcendental signified", understood as "a signified […] whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general" (Derrida, 1998: 158). Like Derrida, though from a different deconstructionist perspective, de Man challenges the traditional idea of an autonomous, non-linguistic meaning. To him, meaning is strictly the result of "applying" grammar's general semantic potential to a specific linguistic unit by means of the referential function of language – a process in the course of which an insurmountable disjunction (referred to by Paul de Man as "the figural dimension of language" [de Man, 1979: 270]) emerges between the grammatical system of text-generating relationships and functions on the one hand, and "meaning" on the other hand. In other words, the referential function is responsible for both generating a text and the appearance of a referent that annuls the "generality" or "indetermination" of grammar's "potential for meaning", thus undermining the grammatical principle itself which has led to its constitution. The fact that meanings is always mediated by language – and therefore never free of figuration, in the Demanian sense of the word – casts doubt on its cognitive value.

De Man's outlook on language is to a great extent indebted to Nietzsche's linguistic scepticism, based on the idea of the rhetorical – i. e., epistemologically unreliable – character of all language, as expressed by the philosopher in the course on rhetoric he taught at the University of Basel in 1872-73. According to Nietzsche, there is "no such thing as an unrhetorical, 'natural' language […] that could be used as a point of reference: language is itself the result of purely rhetorical tricks and devices….Language is rhetoric, for it only intends to convey a *doxa* (opinion), not an *episteme* (truth)…. Tropes are not something that can be added or subtracted from language at will; they are its truest nature", and "there is no such thing as a proper meaning that can be communicated only in certain particular cases." (Nietzsche, 1922: 5:300; de Man, 1979: 105-106); tropes do not derive their figurative meaning from a "literal, proper denomination", they are not "a derived, marginal, or aberrant form of language but the linguistic paradigm par excellence" (de Man, 1979: 105). Such a conception of language marks a departure from the metaphysical tradition criticised by deconstruction, among other things, for believing in the possibility of the unmediated expression of non-linguistic reality and judging "the authority of the language" by "its adequation to an extralinguistic referent or meaning", rather than by "the intralinguistic resources of figures" (de Man, 1979: 106).

De Man's rhetorical reading of a passage from a later Nietzschean text published posthumously, together with other fragments, under the title *The Will to* Power, serves as an illustration of the essential figurality of even the most conceptual types of language. The Nietzschean text discusses the "phenomenalism of the inner world" (understood as the human tendency to describe mental events in terms associated with the experience of the phenomenal world [de Man, 1979: 107]) starting from the example of pain and the way it is erroneously projected in a certain part of the body, where it does not originate. Nietzsche remarks that the perceptions naïvely considered as being caused by the outside world are, in reality, determined from the inside, and denounces the mechanism of error: "The fragment of outside world of which we are conscious is a correlative of the effect that has reached us from outside and that is then projected, a posteriori, as its 'cause'…" (Nietzsche, 1956: 3:804-05; de Man, 1979: 107).

De Man shows how the text, whose argumentation is initially based on two pairs of metaphysical oppositions (subject/object and inside/outside), in effect, when read rhetorically, deconstructs its classic binary model, replacing the apparently "closed and coherent" system by an "arbitrary, open" one through the substitution and reversal of the polarities; what at first sight appears as an "objective, external cause" of an "inner, conscious event" turns out to be the result of an internal effect ("the effect of an effect") and the so-called "effect" is "the cause of its own cause" (de Man, 1979: 107), which means that the attributes of "causality" and "location" can easily be substituted for each other. The resulting error consists in deducing logical priority from a contingent, temporal one: we tend to confuse the effect for the cause only because the latter reaches our consciousness later than the former. Like Nietzsche, who views the process of substitution and reversal as essentially linguistic, rhetorical, de Man notes that "all rhetorical structures… are based on substitutive reversals" [de Man, 1979: 113] devoid of any truth-value. The "aberrant" philosophical model known as "the phenomenalism of consciousness" is therefore nothing but a linguistic, metaleptic, construct – a rhetorical effect based on an exchange or substitution of cause and effect – which only illustrates Nietzsche's own statement about the rhetorical essence of language and confirms the validity of his definition of (philosophical) truth as "an army" of tropes. All truths are "metaphors that have been used up and have lost their imprint and that now operate as mere metal, no longer as coins" (Nietzsche, 1956: 3:314; de Man, 1979: 110) – that is, metaphors degraded into a literal meaning grounded on a "lie" (as also demonstrated by J.-J. Rousseau's description of the conceptualisation process in the "*Second Discourse on the Origins and the Foundations of Inequality among Men*" and the *"Essay on the Origin of Language"*).
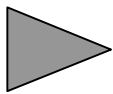
The conceptualisation process and the figurality of all language

De Man's reading of Rousseau, indeed, adds further evidence to the above-mentioned "thesis" of the figurality of all language. In the *Second Discourse,* conceptualisation is defined as the rhetorical substitution of a noun for another on the basis of an unwarranted analogy that hides the real differences between entities, as in the case of the appearance of abstractions such as "tree", a concept produced by substituting the single word "tree" for isolated individual entities (for instance two trees initially called "A" and "B"). The text distinguishes between two acts: "naming" (the "literal denomination" of entities, i. e., tree "A" and tree "B") and "conceptualisation" (an exchange of properties based on resemblance, performed in keeping with Aristotle's classic definition of metaphor as "the transfer [*epiphora*] to a thing of a name that designates another thing, a transfer from the genus to the species or from the species to the genus or according to the principle of analogy" [Aristotle, 1970: 1457b; de Man, 1979: 146]). However, in the *Essay on the Origin of* Language*, Rousseau describes conceptualisation (the birth of the proper name "man") as a two-stage process: first, the primitive man's encounter with other men, and his natural tendency – justified by fear – to see them in a distorted manner, as "larger and stronger than himself" (Rousseau, 1970: 56; de Man, 1979: 149), and consequently call them "giants"; then, the reassuring discovery, after several encounters with his fellow-men, that there is no real discrepancy between himself and the others in terms of stature and strength, which prompts him to use another name to designate them and apply to himself as well: "man". According to de Man's reading of the text, the man's first, exaggerated reaction, merely based on an "'inward' feeling", and explains the appearance of the word "giant" resulted from the act of denomination. "Giant" is a "blind" metaphor based on substitution ('*he* is a giant' substituting for '*I* am afraid')" and analogy (between an inner feeling, fear, and outward properties such as size); it is a substitutive figure of speech that turns a "referential situation" (i.e., fear, a mere hypothesis) into "literal fact" (de Man, 1979: 151). De Man considers it a "blind" metaphor – not because it distorts reality, but rather "because it presents as certain what is, in fact, a mere possibility" (de Man, 1979: 151]). Like any other metaphor, it is "aberrant" to the extent to which it "believes" or "feigns to believe" its referential meaning, which is a linguistic product, or literalises its referent, thus transforming fiction into reality, and overlooking "the fictional, textual element in the nature of the entity it connotes" (de Man, 1979: 151).

De Man therefore reads the text as a metaphorical illustration of the linguistic act of conceptualisation (understood as an "intralinguistic process" leading to "the invention of a figural metalanguage" [de Man, 1979: 152]) with its two distinct

moments: the initial error represented by the innocent, spontaneous metaphor "giant" and caused by the "rhetorical potential of the language", and "the deliberate error" involved in the creation of the conceptual metaphor "man", based on a cunning use of "number" (or "the metaphor of numerical sameness", itself delusive) as a way of making the initial wild metaphor appear harmless – and ultimately making life in society possible; the concept is thus denounced as "a lie superimposed upon an error", which deliberately creates the illusion of identity (by interpreting the numerical metaphor as "a statement of literal fact" [de Man, 1979: 155]). This leads de Man to the epistemologically unsettling conclusion that, since all language is conceptual, "all language is about language", or all language is a figural, metaphorical metalanguage that shares the blindness of metaphor (a mystifying figure that "literalises its referential indetermination into a specific unit of meaning" [de Man, 1979: 153]) – hence the impossibility of making a clear distinction between "literal reference" and "figural connotation" (de Man, 1979: 158).

The indeterminacy of meaning

As also proved by the previously mentioned description of the insoluble linguistic conflict between grammar and referential meaning, de Man does not deny the referential function, but merely doubts "its authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition" (de Man, 1997: 11). More precisely, he questions the semantic value of language, "the reliability of referential meaning" (AR 208), since, as he repeatedly points out, meaning is a purely linguistic, rhetorical product. The figural status of the word "man", for instance (which the close reading of Rousseau's text identifies as a conceptual metaphor "grafted" on an initial "blind metaphor"), raises questions about the referential status of Rousseau's entire discourse, and about the referentiality of any other discourse. The ambivalence of discourses is not due to a multitude of possibly incompatible meanings but to the semantic indeterminacy of these meanings. If any type of language is conceptual, it follows that "it can never know whether it is about anything at all including itself; since it is precisely the *aboutness*, the referentiality, that is in question" (de Man, 1979: 161). De Man's criticism, always vacillating between the contradictory impulses of treating concepts as "referential names for extralinguistic entities" and interpreting them as "mere phantoms of language" (de Man, 1979: 161), cannot but acknowledge the texts' indeterminacy, and illustrate it in its own densely conceptual discourse.

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