**Paul de Man, “Epistemology of Metaphor”**

The essay discusses the problem of figurative language in philosophical discourse (and in all discursive uses of language, including historiography and literary criticism).

Philosophy has either to give up its constitutive claim to rigor or free itself from figuration. Therefore it tries to delimit the boundaries of the influence of figurative language. Empirical British philosophy (Locke) - can circumscribe “the potentially disruptive power of rhetoric” (but Hegelian metaphysics cannot do this).

**I.**

**John Locke: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding***:

**Priority of experience over knowledge** (Book II). At times, Locke seems to forget language altogether, but it is impossible, since **knowledge is too closely connected with words.**

**Words interpose themselves between the truth and our understanding. They are the medium through which the objects pass into our experience. In this way, they obscure the truth.**

The figurative power of language opens the possibility to use language misleadingly and seductively: “men find pleasure in being deceived” (“naked Truth” etc.). It “insinuates wrong ideas, moves passions and therefore misleads the judgement”.

“Fair sex” (woman) is “a fine thing as long as it is kept in its proper place.” Here metaphysics is combined with patriarchal authority.

Metaphor of language is a **conduit** (the work of a plumber and not “poetic pipes and timbrels”). However, even conduits may corrupt the fountains of knowledge and block its spreading, like the distribution of water for public use.

As a result, **Locke himself uses metaphorical language** (fountains of knowledge, language as a conduit...). **Metaphors not only ILLUSTRATE cognition but cognition is shaped by metaphors.** Locke in fact **develops a theory of tropes** although it is not his explicit intention:

he is against Cratyllism (motivated signs) and believes in the arbitrariness of the sign.

Locke has a **semantic rather than semiotic notion of language** (signification is a substitution of words for “ideas”, not the autonomous linguistic sign): **the use and abuse of words starts from their meaning** and not from themselves.

This theory is connected with his **theory of ideas**:

1. simple ideas (space, movement, stasis, size shape) – “primary qualities” and “secondary qualities” mediated through our perception (directly or indirectly perceived).

2. substances

3. mixed modes

1. **Simple Ideas**

Since the nominal and the real essence coincide in them, there should not be any problem.

But: “The names of simple ideas are not capable of any definitions,” they are not objects of understanding.

Example: “motion” - no acceptable definition exists, only tautological translation (e.g.

“passage”). And “translation” itself means “motion”: in German it is “übersetzen” which is the same as the Greek “metaphorein.”

Example: “light” - to understand light properly is to understand the *idea* of light (not its cause or perception). But the word “idea”, *eide,* means “light” as well. The sentence “to understand the idea of light” could be translated as “to light the light of light”: **a tautological repetitive translation, not a definition.**

2. **Substances**

Two perspectives:

(a) **Collections of properties**; but nominal and real essences no longer coincide.

Example: “gold” - the properties of gold can be found anywhere, not only in gold itself (e.g., solar light, a peacock’s tail) – a figurative, metaphoric usage. **Tropes can move (like quicksilver) and they can even disappear.** All these (words) are but properties depending on “the real constitution of gold” and **powers active or passive in reference to other bodies. Properties do not properly totalize, only in a haphazard or unreliable way**. **The use of FIGURATIVE language is NOT a problem of ontology, but of AUTHORITY:** no one has the authority to determine the signification of the word “gold” because it is only a collection of properties depending on its real constitution or of powers in reference to other bodies. **This authority cannot be exercised by any authoritative body** (the Royal Academy which wanted to do this): we have no way of defining the boundaries that separate the name of one entity from the name of another. Tropes are no mere travellers, they are **smugglers.**

(b) **Essences which support these properties** (are their “ground” - the link that binds the properties together, substance as the common ground of theproperties)

Example: “man” - What essence is the proper of man? Can the proper (a linguistic notion) and the essence (independent of linguistic mediation) coincide? Two possible definitions of man: 1. outward appearance, 2. inner soul: a necessary link between the two is a binary polarity, i.e., **metaphor as the figure of complementarity and correspondence.** It can be a question of life and death: the killing of “monstrous births” is an ethically charged issue (this does not occur in the case of simple ideas).

**3. Mixed Modes**

Examples: manslaughter, incest, parricide, adultery (also mermaid and unicorn and centaur)

The use and abuse of language cannot be separated from each other: abuse of language (catachresis: the **legs** of a table, the **face** of the mountain) produces monstrosities in the most innocent way.

Mixed modes “can dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious ways”. **Catachreses contain something monstrous**; the word produces the entity it signifies (no equivalence in nature). Locke condemns them as **chimaeras** (unreal phantasms). Nonetheless, in doing so, **he condemns all language**, because the empirical entity is never “sheltered from tropological disfiguration”. Locke does not offer an acceptable solution to this. Although he distinguishes between **physical and moral nature**, he can never demonstrate the latter. The same is true of **words:** justice can never be properly defined (demonstrated).

**II.**

**Etienne Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines***

depends on Locke.

Two sections deal with language explicitly, but the treatise is in fact modelled on a linguistic structure because Condillac’s **theory of mind is in fact a theory of sign**.

Chapter “Des abstractions” : deals with abstraction in a broad sense, not thinking about differences but **correspondences**. These are **metaphors or tropes**. Every discourse uses abstractions. But the abstractions are seductive and corruptive. They are capable of infinite proliferation and there is a very little hope they can be mastered (even if they are critically analysed).

Actually, Condillac uses almost a narrative pattern to explain this theory. This is a consequence of the tropological nature of language. He contrasts the reality of things in themselves and a true reality (not located in things but in the subject, mind). Mastery of the subject over entities: to understand means to seize *(begreifen)*, to lock up the impressions in the mind. This violent approach is the only way in which the subject can constitute its own existence. Because entities, in themselves, are neither distinct nor defined, they are a mere flux, and the mind is the ground of the flux (Descartes).

The self-constitutive act of the subject, reflection, is an “analytical act that distinguishes differences and articulates reality”. (These articulations are called abstractions.)

Ontological aspect: the subject depends on something which is not itself (co called “modifications”) in order to be at all. The modifications are devoid of being in themselves but the mind sees them as being both itself and not itself at the same time. “The mind ‘is’ to the extent that it ‘is like’ its other in its inability to be.” (p. 25)

Being and identity are based on a resemblance. It does not consist in things, but is **posited by the mind as a verbal act**. **To be verbal: to allow substitutions based on illusory resemblances**. As a result, **mind is the central metaphor, the metaphor of metaphors**.

What Locke only sensed and said implicitly, Condillac makes more threatening. According to him the subject is inscribed in the narrative. We have created ourselves by telling stories about our mind, existence and language.

**III.**

**Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement***

contrasts “schemata” and symbolic language, “schematic” and symbolic hypotyposes (iconic representations) - Art. 59.

“Hypotyposis” is an iconic element in representation (Peirce). It makes present to the senses something which is not in their reach because it consists of too abstract elements (similar to the figure of *prosopopeia* - personification).

1. Schemata- objects of mind (*Verstand*): a priori aperception (e.g. triangle)

2. Symbols- objects of reason (*Vernunft*), similar to Condillac’s abstractions: there is an underlying similarity between the symbol and the symbolized. This is an **analogical (not actual)**

**resemblance**.

Unlike Locke and Condillac, Kant sees tropes as epistemologically reliable. One can move from the symbolic order to the rational precision of the schemata, while remaining in the tropological field.

Kant formulates a clear distinction between the symbolic and the schematic but at some points he seems not to be certain whether this distinction is **a priori** or not - his theory loses its conviction.

Kant himself often uses metaphors (e.g., *unterlegen*). “If the distinction between a priori and symbolic judgements can only be stated by means of metaphors that are themselves symbolic, then **Locke's and Condillac’s difficulties have not been overcome**.”

**IV. Conclusions**

1. **It is useless to repress the rhetorical structure of texts**, **because RHETORIC CANNOT BE ISOLATED FROM ITS EPISTEMOLOGICAL FUNCTION.** But, at the same time, it is not correct to ignore the disfiguring power of figuration.

2. **Our modernity returns to the Enlightenment**: continuous line: Locke – Rousseau – Kant - Nietzsche (vs. Fichte, Hegel)

3. **Syntagmatic narratives are part of the same system as paradigmatic tropes**. **Narratives, histories, are a correlative** (not the reverse) **of rhetoric**. **A rhetoric of history is prior to a history of rhetoric.**

4. **The distinction between literature and philosophy is not based on the difference between the aesthetic and the epistemological.**