Allegories of Reading

FIGURAL LANGUAGE IN·ROUSSEAU, NIETZSCHE, RILKE, AND PROUST

Paul de Man

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Figural Language
in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust

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Preface

ALLEGORIES OF READING STARTED OUT AS A HISTORICAL
study and ended up as a theory of reading. I began to read Rousseau
seriously in preparation for a historical reflection on Romanticism
and found myself unable to progress beyond local difficulties of
interpretation. In trying to cope with this, I had to shift from histori-
cal definition to the problematics of reading. This shift, which is
typical of my generation, is of more interest in its results than in its
causes. It could, in principle, lead to a rhetoric of reading reaching
beyond the canonical principles of literary history which still serve, in
this book, as the starting point of their own displacement. The prin-
ciples underlying the thematic diversity of Rousseau, the chronology
of Rilke and Nietzsche, the rhetoric of Proust, are not left intact by
the reading, but this critical result remains dependent on the initial
position of these very principles. Whether a further step, which
would leave this hermeneutic model behind, can be taken should not
a priori or naïvely be taken for granted.

   In Part II, on Rousseau, I have attempted the elaboration and
the undoing of a system of tropological transformations in the form
of a sustained argument. Part I establishes a similar pattern in a
more fragmented way by moving between several authors rather
than staying within a single corpus. The choice of Proust and of Rilke
as examples is partly due to chance, but since the ostensible pathos of
their tone and depth of their statement make them particularly resis-
tant to a reading that is no longer entirely thematic, one could argue
that if *their* work yields to such a rhetorical scheme, the same would
necessarily be true for writers whose rhetorical strategies are less
hidden behind the seductive powers of identification.

   What emerges is a process of reading in which rhetoric is a
disruptive intertwining of trope and persuasion or—which is not
quite the same thing—of cognitive and performative language. The
implications of this conclusion are not easy to unfold, nor can they be
stated in summary fashion, separated from the intricacies of specific
readings. Nevertheless, opponents of such an approach have been
more eager to attack what they assume to be its ideological motives

rather than the technicalities of its procedure. This is particularly true with regard to the term "deconstruction," which has rapidly become a label as well as a target. Most of this book was written before "deconstruction" became a bone of contention, and the term is used here in a technical rather than a polemical sense—which does not imply that it therefore becomes neutral or ideologically innocent. But I saw no reason to delete it. No other word states so economically the impossibility to evaluate positively or negatively the inescapable evaluation it implies. Something is lost when the same process is described by a purely negative term, as when Nietzsche speaks of the destruction (*Zertrümmerung*) of conceptual constructs or Pascal of the demolition (*démolition*) of a conviction that is itself already a destruction. I consciously came across "deconstruction" for the first time in the writings of Jacques Derrida, which means that it is associated with a power of inventive rigor to which I lay no claim but which I certainly do not wish to erase. Deconstruction, as was easily predictable, has been much misrepresented, dismissed as a harmless academic game or denounced as a terrorist weapon, and I have all the fewer illusions about the possibility of countering these aberrations since such an expectation would go against the drift of my own readings.

Review, Glyph, Studies in Romanticism, and *Yale French Studies.* Permission to reprint is gratefully acknowledged. I have myself translated the two sections originally written in French.

I wish to thank Ellen Graham and Sheila Huddleston of the Yale University Press for particularly efficient and speedy copyediting, certain to cleanse the final text of all mistakes but my own.

All translations of French and German quotations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

P. d. M.

New Haven, April 1979

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Part I

Rhetoric

1   Semiology and Rhetoric

TO JUDGE FROM VARIOUS RECENT PUBLICATIONS, THE spirit of the times is not blowing in the direction of formalist and intrinsic criticism. We may no longer be hearing too much about relevance but we keep hearing a great deal about reference, about the nonverbal "outside" to which language refers, by which it is conditioned and upon which it acts. The stress falls not so much on the fictional status of literature—a property now perhaps somewhat too easily taken for granted—but on the interplay between these fictions and categories that are said to partake of reality, such as the self, man, society, "the artist, his culture and the human community," as one critic puts it. Hence the emphasis on hybrid texts considered to be partly literary and partly referential, on popular fictions deliberately aimed towards social and psychological gratification, on literary autobiography as a key to the understanding of the self, and so on. We speak as if, with the problems of literary form resolved once and forever, and with the techniques of structural analysis refined to near-perfection, we could now move "beyond formalism" towards the questions that really interest us and reap, at last, the fruits of the ascetic concentration on techniques that prepared us for this decisive step. With the internal law and order of literature well policed, we can now confidently devote ourselves to the foreign affairs, the external politics of literature. Not only do we feel able to do so, but we owe it to ourselves to take this step: our moral conscience would not allow us to do otherwise. Behind the assurance that valid interpretation is possible, behind the recent interest in writing and reading as potentially effective public speech acts, stands a highly respectable moral imperative that strives to reconcile the internal, formal, private structures of literary language with their external, referential, and public effects.

I want, for the moment, to consider briefly this tendency in itself, as an undeniable and recurrent historical fact, without regard

for its truth or falseness or for its value as desirable or pernicious. It is a fact that this sort of thing happens, again and again, in literary studies. On the one hand, literature cannot merely be received as a definite unit of referential meaning that can be decoded without leaving a residue. The code is unusually conspicuous, complex, and enigmatic; it attracts an inordinate amount of attention to itself, and this attention has to acquire the rigor of a method. The structural moment of concentration on the code for its own sake cannot be avoided, and literature necessarily breeds its own formalism. Technical innovations in the methodical study of literature only occur when this kind of attention predominates. It can legitimately be said, for example, that, from a technical point of view, very little has happened in American criticism since the innovative works of New Criticism. There certainly have been numerous excellent books of criticism since, but in none of them have the techniques of description and interpretation evolved beyond the techniques of close reading established in the thirties and the forties. Formalism, it seems, is an all-absorbing and tyrannical muse; the hope that one can be at the same time technically original and discursively eloquent is not borne out by the history of literary criticism.

On the other hand—and this is the real mystery—no literary formalism, no matter how accurate and enriching in its analytic powers, is ever allowed to come into being without seeming reductive. When form is considered to be the external trappings of literary meaning or content, it seems superficial and expendable. The development of intrinsic, formalist criticism in the twentieth century has changed this model: form is now a solipsistic category of self-reflection, and the referential meaning is said to be extrinsic. The polarities of inside and outside have been reversed, but they are still the same polarities that are at play: internal meaning has become outside reference, and the outer form has become the intrinsic structure. A new version of reductiveness at once follows this reversal: formalism nowadays is mostly described in an imagery of imprisonment and claustrophobia: the "prison house of language," "the impasse of formalist criticism," etc. Like the grandmother in Proust's novel ceaselessly driving the young Marcel out into the garden, away from the unhealthy inwardness of his closeted reading, critics cry out for the fresh air of referential meaning. Thus, with the structure of the code so opaque, but the meaning so anxious to blot out the obstacle of form, no wonder that the reconciliation of form and

meaning would be so attractive. The attraction of reconciliation is the elective breeding-ground of false models and metaphors; it accounts for the metaphorical model of literature as a kind of box that separates an inside from an outside, and the reader or critic as the person who opens the lid in order to release in the open what was secreted but inaccessible inside. It matters little whether we call the inside of the box the content or the form, the outside the meaning or the appearance. The recurrent debate opposing intrinsic to extrinsic criticism stands under the aegis of an inside/outside metaphor that is never being seriously questioned.

Metaphors are much more tenacious than facts, and I certainly don't expect to dislodge this age-old model in one short try. I merely wish to speculate on a different set of terms, perhaps less simple in their differential relationships than the strictly polar, binary opposition between inside and outside and therefore less likely to enter into the easy play of chiasmic reversals. I derive these terms (which are as old as the hills) pragmatically from the observation of developments and debates in recent critical methodology.

One of the most controversial among these developments coincides with a new approach to poetics or, as it is called in Germany, poetology, as a branch of general semiotics. In France, a semiology of literature comes about as the outcome of the long-deferred but all the more explosive encounter of the nimble French literary mind with the category of form. Semiology, as opposed to semantics, is the science or study of signs as signifiers; it does not ask what words mean but how they mean. Unlike American New Criticism, which derived the internalization of form from the practice of highly self-conscious modern writers, French semiology turned to linguistics for its model and adopted Saussure and Jakobson rather than Valéry or Proust for its masters. By an awareness of the arbitrariness of the sign (Saussure) and of literature as an autotelic statement "focused on the way it is expressed" (Jakobson) the entire question of meaning can be bracketed, thus freeing the critical discourse from the debilitating burden of paraphrase. The demystifying power of semiology, within the context of French historical and thematic criticism, has been considerable. It demonstrated that the perception of the literary dimensions of language is largely obscured if one submits uncritically to the authority of reference. It also revealed how tenaciously this authority continues to assert itself in a variety of disguises, ranging from the crudest ideology to the most refined forms

of aesthetic and ethical judgment. It especially explodes the myth of
semantic correspondence between sign and referent, the wishful
hope of having it both ways, of being, to paraphrase Marx in the
German Ideology, a formalist critic in the morning and a communal
moralist in the afternoon, of serving both the technique of form and
the substance of meaning. The results, in the practice of French
criticism, have been as fruitful as they are irreversible. Perhaps for
the first time since the late eighteenth century, French critics can
come at least somewhat closer to the kind of linguistic awareness
that never ceased to be operative in its poets and novelists and that
forced all of them, including Sainte Beuve, to write their main works
"contre Sainte Beuve." The distance was never so considerable in
England and the United States, which does not mean, however, that
we may be able, in this country, to dispense altogether with some
preventative semiological hygiene.

      One of the most striking characteristics of literary semiology as
it is practiced today, in France and elsewhere, is the use of grammat-
ical (especially syntactical) structures conjointly with rhetorical
structures, without apparent awareness of a possible discrepancy
between them. In their literary analyses, Barthes, Genette, Todorov,
Greimas, and their disciples all simplify and regress from Jakobson
in letting grammar and rhetoric function in perfect continuity, and
in passing from grammatical to rhetorical structures without
difficulty or interruption. Indeed, as the study of grammatical struc-
tures is refined in contemporary theories of generative, transforma-
tional, and distributive grammar, the study of tropes and of figures
(which is how the term *rhetoric* is used here, and not in the derived
sense of comment or of eloquence or persuasion) becomes a mere
extension of grammatical models, a particular subset of syntactical
relations. In the recent *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du
langage*, Ducrot and Todorov write that rhetoric has always been
satisfied with a paradigmatic view over words (words substituting
for each other), without questioning their syntagmatic relationship
(the contiguity of words to each other). There ought to be another
perspective, complementary to the first, in which metaphor, for
example, would not be defined as a substitution but as a particular
type of combination. Research inspired by linguistics or, more nar-
rowly, by syntactical studies, has begun to reveal this possibility—
but it remains to be explored. Todorov, who calls one of his books a
Grammar of the Decameron, rightly thinks of his own work and that

of his associates as first explorations in the elaboration of a system-
atic grammar of literary modes, genres, and also of literary figures.
Perhaps the most perceptive work to come out of this school, Ge-
nette's studies of figural modes, can be shown to be assimilations of
rhetorical transformations or combinations to syntactical, grammat-
ical patterns. Thus a recent study, now printed in *Figures III* and
entitled *Metaphor and Metonymy in Proust*, shows the combined
presence, in a wide and astute selection of passages, of paradigmatic,
metaphorical figures with syntagmatic, metonymic structures. The
combination of both is treated descriptively and nondialectically
without considering the possibility of logical tensions.

One can ask whether this reduction of figure to grammar is
legitimate. The existence of grammatical structures, within and be-
yond the unit of the sentence, in literary texts is undeniable, and their
description and classification are indispensable. The question re-
mains if and how figures of rhetoric can be included in such a
taxonomy. This question is at the core of the debate going on, in a
wide variety of apparently unrelated forms, in contemporary poetics.
But the historical picture of contemporary criticism is too confused
to make the mapping out of such a topography a useful exercise. Not
only are these questions mixed in and mixed up within particular
groups or local trends, but they are often co-present, without appar-
ent contradiction, within the work of a single author.

Neither is the theory of the question suitable for quick exposi-
tory treatment. To distinguish the epistemology of grammar from
the epistemology of rhetoric is a redoubtable task. On an entirely
naïve level, we tend to conceive of grammatical systems as tending
towards universality and as simply generative, i.e., as capable of
deriving an infinity of versions from a single model (that may govern
transformations as well as derivations) without the intervention of
another model that would upset the first. We therefore think of the
relationship between grammar and logic, the passage from gram-
mar to propositions, as being relatively unproblematic: no true prop-
ositions are conceivable in the absence of grammatical consistency or
of controlled deviation from a system of consistency no matter how
complex. Grammar and logic stand to each other in a dyadic rela-
tionship of unsubverted support. In a logic of acts rather than of
statements, as in Austin's theory of speech acts, that has had such a
strong influence on recent American work in literary semiology, it is
also possible to move between speech acts and grammar without

difficulty. The performance of what is called illocutionary acts such
as ordering, questioning, denying, assuming, etc., within the lan-
guage is congruent with the grammatical structures of syntax in the
corresponding imperative, interrogative, negative, optative sen-
tences. "The rules for illocutionary acts," writes Richard Ohman in a
recent paper, "determine whether performance of a given act is
well-executed, in just the same way as *grammatical* rules determine
whether the product of a locutionary act—a sentence—is well
formed. . . . But whereas the rules of grammar concern the rela-
tionships among sound, syntax, and meaning, the rules of illocu-
tionary acts concern relationships among people."[1] And since rhet-
oric is then conceived exclusively as persuasion, as actual action upon
others (and not as an intralinguistic figure or trope), the continuity
between the illocutionary realm of grammar and the perlocutionary
realm of rhetoric is self-evident. It becomes the basis for a new
rhetoric that, exactly as is the case for Todorov and Genette, would
also be a new grammar.

Without engaging the substance of the question, it can be
pointed out, without having to go beyond recent and American
examples, and without calling upon the strength of an age-old tradi-
tion, that the continuity here assumed between grammar and
rhetoric is not borne out by theoretical and philosophical specula-
tion. Kenneth Burke mentions *deflection* (which he compares struc-
turally to Freudian displacement), defined as "any slight bias or even
unintended error," as the rhetorical basis of language, and deflection
is then conceived as a dialectical subversion of the consistent link
between sign and meaning that operates within grammatical pat-
terns; hence Burke's well-known insistence on the distinction be-
tween grammar and rhetoric. Charles Sanders Peirce, who, with
Nietzsche and Saussure, laid the philosophical foundation for modern
semiology, stressed the distinction between grammar and rhetoric in
his celebrated and so suggestively unfathomable definition of the
sign. He insists, as is well known, on the necessary presence of a third
element, called the interpretant, within any relationship that the sign
entertains with its object. The sign is to be interpreted if we are to
understand the idea it is to convey, and this is so because the sign is
not the thing but a meaning derived from the thing by a process here

1. "Speech, Literature, and the Space in Between," *New Literary History* 4
(Autumn 1972): 50.

called representation that is not simply generative, i.e., dependent on a univocal origin. The interpretation of the sign is not, for Peirce, a meaning but another sign; it is a reading, not a decodage, and this reading has, in its turn, to be interpreted into another sign, and so on *ad infinitum*. Peirce calls this process by means of which "one sign gives birth to another" pure rhetoric, as distinguished from pure grammar, which postulates the possibility of unproblematic, dyadic meaning, and pure logic, which postulates the possibility of the universal truth of meanings. Only if the sign engendered meaning in the same way that the object engenders the sign, that is, by representation, would there be no need to distinguish between grammar and rhetoric.

These remarks should indicate at least the existence and the difficulty of the question, a difficulty which puts its concise theoretical exposition beyond my powers. I must retreat therefore into a pragmatic discourse and try to illustrate the tension between grammar and rhetoric in a few specific textual examples. Let me begin by considering what is perhaps the most commonly known instance of an apparent symbiosis between a grammatical and a rhetorical structure, the so-called rhetorical question, in which the figure is conveyed directly by means of a syntactical device. I take the first example from the sub-literature of the mass media: asked by his wife whether he wants to have his bowling shoes laced over or laced under, Archie Bunker answers with a question: "What's the difference?" Being a reader of sublime simplicity, his wife replies by patiently explaining the difference between lacing over and lacing under, whatever this may be, but provokes only ire. "What's the difference" did not ask for difference but means instead "I don't give a damn what the difference is." The same grammatical pattern engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning. As long as we are talking about bowling shoes, the consequences are relatively trivial; Archie Bunker, who is a great believer in the authority of origins (as long, of course, as they are the right origins) muddles along in a world where literal and figurative meanings get in each other's way, though not without discomforts. But suppose that it is a *de*-bunker rather than a "Bunker," and a de-bunker of the arche (or origin), an archie Debunker such as Nietzsche or Jacques Derrida for instance, who asks the question "What is the Difference"—and we cannot even tell from

his grammar whether he "really" wants to know "what" difference is or is just telling us that we shouldn't even try to find out. Confronted with the question of the difference between grammar and rhetoric, grammar allows us to ask the question, but the sentence by means of which we ask it may deny the very possibility of asking. For what is the use of asking, I ask, when we cannot even authoritatively decide whether a question asks or doesn't ask?

The point is as follows. A perfectly clear syntactical paradigm (the question) engenders a sentence that has at least two meanings, of which the one asserts and the other denies its own illocutionary mode. It is not so that there are simply two meanings, one literal and the other figural, and that we have to decide which one of these meanings is the right one in this particular situation. The confusion can only be cleared up by the intervention of an extra-textual intention, such as Archie Bunker putting his wife straight; but the very anger he displays is indicative of more than impatience; it reveals his despair when confronted with a structure of linguistic meaning that he cannot control and that holds the discouraging prospect of an infinity of similar future confusions, all of them potentially cata-strophic in their consequences. Nor is this intervention really a part of the mini-text constituted by the figure which holds our attention only as long as it remains suspended and unresolved. I follow the usage of common speech in calling this semiological enigma "rhetor-ical." The grammatical model of the question becomes rhetorical not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails. Rhetoric radically sus-pends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aber-ration. And although it would perhaps be somewhat more remote from common usage, I would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself. I could point to a great number of antecedents to this equation of literature with figure; the most recent reference would be to Monroe Beardsley's insistence in his contribution to the *Essays* to honor William Wim-satt, that literary language is characterized by being "distinctly above the norm in ratio of implicit [or, I would say rhetorical] to explicit meaning."[2]

2. "The Concept of Literature," in *Literary Theory and Structure: Essays in Honor of William K. Wimsatt*, ed. Frank Brady, John Palmer, and Martin Price (New Haven, 1973), p. 37.