

Jacques Lacan

*Metaphor of the Subject*¹

This text, rewritten in June 1961, consists of an intervention made on June 23, 1960 in response to Mr. Perelman who was arguing on the basis of "the idea of rationality and the rule of justice" before the Philosophical Society.

It anticipates, in some sense, as concerns metaphor, what I have since been formulating by way of a logic of the unconscious.

I am indebted to François Regnault for having reminded me in time to add this text to the second edition of this volume [the *Ecrits*].

Procedures of argumentation interest Mr. Perelman inasmuch as they are scorned by the scientific tradition. He is thus led to plead misunderstanding before a Philosophical Society.

He would do better to go beyond defense if he would win us over to his side. That is the sense in which the remark that I will bring to his attention is intended: it is on the basis of the unconscious' manifestations, which are a concern of mine as an analyst, that I have developed a theory of the effects of the signifier in which I connect up with rhetoric. This is attested to by the fact that my students, in reading his works, recognize it to be their daily fare at my seminar.

Thus I shall be led to question him less about what he has argued here, perhaps too cautiously, than about a point at which his work takes us right to the crux of thought.

Metaphor, for example, concerning which it is known that I link it up with one of the two fundamental facets of the play of the unconscious.

It cannot be said that I disagree with the way Mr. Perelman deals with metaphor, detecting therein a four-term operation, or even

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with the fact that he argues for decisively separating it from images on such grounds.

I do not, however, believe that he is justified in thinking he has reduced it to the function of analogy.²

If we take it for granted that, in the case of analogy, the specific effect of the relations A/B and D/C³ is sustained by the very heterogeneity by which they divide up into theme and phoros⁴, this formalism is no longer valid in the case of metaphor, and the best proof thereof is that the formalism becomes confused in the very illustrations Mr. Perelman provides of it.

There are, as it were, four terms in metaphor, but their heterogeneity involves a parting of the ways--three against one--and is tantamount to that of the signifier and the signified.

To expand on a formula I gave for metaphor in an article entitled "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious"⁵, I will rewrite it as follows:

$$\frac{s}{s_1} \cdot \frac{s_2}{x} \rightarrow s\left(\frac{1}{s''}\right)$$

Metaphor is, quite radically speaking, the effect of the substitution of one signifier for another in a chain, nothing natural predestining the signifier for this function of phoros apart from the fact that two signifiers are involved, which are, as such, reducible to a phonemic opposition.

To demonstrate this using one of the Mr. Perelman's own examples, the one he has judiciously chosen from Berkeley's third dialogue⁶, "An ocean of false science" will be written as follows as it is better to restore what the French translation already tends to "make dormant" [*endormir*] (to do justice, along with Mr. Perelman, to the metaphor so felicitously found by rhetoricians):

$$\frac{\text{an ocean}}{\text{learning}} \text{ of } \frac{\text{false}}{x} \rightarrow \text{an ocean} \left(\frac{1}{?} \right)$$

Learning--*enseignement*--indeed, is not science, and one senses even more clearly here that the term has no more to do with the ocean than a fish with a bicycle.

The sunken cathedral⁷ of what has been taught [*enseigné*] heretofore concerning this matter is no longer likely to ring vainly in our ears if it is reduced to the alternation of a muffled and Sonorous bell by which the phrase penetrates us--lear-ning, lear-ning--yet not from the depths of a liquid layer, but rather from the fallacy of its own arguments.

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The ocean is one of those arguments, and nothing else. I mean: literature, which must be understood in its context, by which it bears the meaning that the cosmos can, at its outermost bound, become a locus of deception. A signified thus, you may retort, with which the metaphor begins. No doubt, but within the range of its *effect*, it steps beyond [*franchit*] mere recurrence, propping itself upon the non-meaning of what is just one term among others of the same learning.

What is produced, however, at the place of the question mark in the second part of my formula is a new species in signification: a falseness that disputation cannot fathom, for it is unsoundable the wave and depth of the imaginary's *απειροζ*⁸ in which any vessel [*vase*] is swallowed up should it seek to draw forth something.

By being "awakened" in its freshness, this metaphor, like every other, shows its true colors among the surrealists.

The radical nature of metaphor is seen in the fit of rage, related by Freud, experienced by his Rat Man as a child, still without the arm of foul language, before becoming a full-fledged obsessive neurotic. Upon being thwarted by his father, the boy yelled at him: "*Du Lampe, du Handtuch, du Teller usw*" ("You Lamp! You towel! You plate!" and so on), the criminal nature or genius of which his father hesitated to determine.

And regarding which I myself intend not to lose sight of the dimension of verbal abuse [*injure*] in which metaphor originates abuse that is more serious than we imagine when we reduce it to wartime invective. For it is from such abuse that stems the injustice gratuitously done to every subject by use of an attribute with which any other subject is incited to take a dig at him [*l'entamer*]⁹. "The cat goes bow wow the dog goes meow, meow" That's how the child spell's out the powers of discourse and inaugurates thought.

One might be surprised that I feel the need to take things so far concerning metaphor. But Mr. Perelman will grant me that in invoking, to satisfy his analogical theory the coupled terms swimmer and scholar [*savant*], and then terra firma and truth¹⁰ and in admitting that one can thus multiply them ad infinitum, what he formulates evidently manifests that they are all equally

irrelevant and come down to what I say: no extant signification has anything to do with the question.

Of course, speaking of the constitutive disorganization of every enunciation isn't the whole story [*n'est pas tout dire*], and the example Mr. Perelman revives from Aristotle¹¹, "the evening of life" to speak of old age, is indicative enough in that it does not

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even point out the repression of the most unpleasant face of the metaphorized term which serves to bring out a sense of peacefulness that old age in no way implies in real life [*le réel*].

For if we question the peacefulness of the evening [*la paix du soir*]¹², we realize that it involves no other dimension than the muting of vocal exercises [*abaissement des vocalises*]: whether the singsong [*jabraille*] of harvesters or the chirping of birds.

Considering which, we might remember that while language is essentially blah blah blah, it is nevertheless from language that having and being derive.

That is what the metaphor I chose in the above-mentioned article¹³--namely, Victor Hugo's "*Sa gerbe n'était pas avare ni haineuse*", "His sheaf was neither miserly nor spiteful," from Booz sleeping [*Booz endormi*]-plays on, and it is not an idle remark to say that it evokes the link which, in the case of rich people, unites the position of having with the refusal inscribed in their being. For that is the impasse of love. And its very negation would do no more here, as we know, than posit it, had the metaphor introduced by the substitution of "his sheaf" for the subject not brought forth the sole object the having of which necessitates the failure to be it--the phallus--around which the whole poem revolves right down to its last twist [*tour*].

Which means that the most serious reality, and even the sole serious reality for man, if one considers its role in sustaining the metonymy of his desire, can only be retained in metaphor. What am I trying to get at, if not to convince you that what the unconscious leads us to examine is the law by which enunciation can never be reduced to a statement in any discourse?

Let us not say that I choose my terms therefrom, regardless of what it is I have to say--though it is not pointless to recall here that the discourse of science, insofar as it commends itself by its objectivity, neutrality, and dreariness [*grisaille*], even of the Sulpician¹⁴ variety, is just as dishonest and ill-intentioned as any other rhetoric.

What must be said is that the I of this choice is born somewhere other than in the place at which discourse is enunciated, to be precise in the person who listens.

Doesn't this provide the status of the effects of rhetoric, in showing that they extend to all signification? Let people object that they stop at mathematical discourse--I will agree all the more in that I place the highest value on that discourse precisely because it signifies nothing.

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The only absolute statement was made by the competent authority: namely that no roll of the die in the signifier will ever abolish chance¹⁵ because, let me add, chance exists but within a linguistic determination, and that is true however we consider it--whether in combination with automatism [*automatisme*] or encounter.¹⁶

Translated by Bruce Fink¹⁷

Footnotes

1. [The title, *La Métaphore du Sujet*, could also be rendered, "The Metaphor that is the Subject", "The Subject's Metaphor", or better still "The Subject as Metaphor."]
2. Cf. the pages I would go so far as to qualify as "admirable" in the *Traité de l'argumentation*, Vol. II (Presses Universitaires de France [1958]), pps. 497-534 [in English: Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1969].
3. [Note that Lacan modifies the usual order of the letters in this formulation, which, according to Aristotle and Perelman, are A/B and C/D or A:B::C:D.]
4. [From the Greek *pherein* meaning to carry or bear. According to Perelman, theme refers to the couple A/B, while phoros refers to the couple C/D]
5. *Ecrits*, Seuil, 1966, pps. 493-528 ["The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious" in *Ecrits*, Norton, 1977, pps. 146-178].
6. Cf. *Traité de l'argumentation*, p. 537. [The expression by Berkeley may be found, for example, in *Berkeley's Philosophical Writings*, Collier Books, New York, 1974, p. 221.]
7. [*La cathédrale engloutie* is the title of the Prelude for Piano, Book 1, Number 10 (1910) by Claude Debussy in which Debussy manages to make the piano sound very much like bells ringing. See *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, Macmillan, 1980, Vol. 5, p. 306a.]
8. [The term Lacan uses here has many meanings, among which the following: Doric for $\eta\pi\epsilon\iota\rho\zeta$, meaning terra firma, continent, land; infinite, immense; inextricable, without issue; ignorance of, lacking in experience of.]
9. [The end of this sentence could also be translated as follows: "an attribute with which any other subject is incited to begin it" (the metaphor)].
10. Perelman equates "ocean" with A and "learning" with C in the following schema:

$$\frac{A}{B} \quad \frac{C}{D}$$

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- suggesting that B and D can be implicitly assumed to be any of the following pairs: swimmer, scholar (*savant* can also mean scientist); stream, truth; and terra firma, truth.]
11. *Traité de l'argumentation*, p. 535 [see Aristotle's *Politics*, 1457b].
 12. [Cf. Lacan's discussion of this metaphor in Seminar III, *Les Psychoses*, pps. 15657.]
 13. *Ecrits*, Seuil, 1966, p. 506 [*Ecrits*, Norton, 1977, p. 156]
 14. [The adjective "*Sulpicien*" is related to the Saint-Sulpice church in the sixth arrondissement in Paris, the area immediately surrounding it, the art displayed in the boutiques around the square, and the priests of the church's congregation.]
 15. [The words are from Mallarmé's poem, "*Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard.*"]
 16. [Cf. Lacan's later discussion of this pair of concepts in Chapter 5 of Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Norton, 1978.]
 17. [Generous assistance was received on this translation, as on my translation of "Science and Truth" (NFF, 3, 1989), from Russell Grigg and Henry Sullivan.]