Divergent Convergent: 
Ricoeur, Derrida, and Metaphor

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Abstract
This paper analyzes the exchange between Ricoeur and Derrida concerning metaphor. I argue that the exchange is not a “missed encounter,” as Eftichis Pirovolakis has suggested, but exemplifies a hermeneutic situation in which theoretical divergence is supplemented by a practical convergence. Rather than a mere exegesis of the exchange between Ricoeur and Derrida, I emphasize the practical implications for the interpretation of poetic metaphors. To be more specific, I emphasize the case of Paul Celan’s poem “Blume” and the semantic density of the central metaphor. Although Ricoeur and Derrida diverge in strictly theoretical terms, their theoretical positions—when translated into practical terms—establish different but convergent paradigms for the interpretation of poetic metaphors.

Keywords
Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Paul Celan, metaphor, hermeneutics, deconstruction
Introduction

The exchange between Ricoeur and Derrida around metaphor, also known as “la querelle de la métaphore,” constitutes a fascinating chapter in modern intellectual history. The substance of the exchange is the encounter, on a precise set of issues, of two major philosophers who represent different theoretical paradigms in the contemporary humanities: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction. We might understand the exchange between Ricoeur and Derrida as an episode in a larger confrontation, a wider set of exchanges, which includes the debate between Gadamer and Derrida, among others.

In a narrow sense, the quarrel is played out in a series of three texts. The thesis, as it were, is established in Derrida’s essay “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy” (*Margins of Philosophy* 207-71). In this essay, Derrida conceives of metaphor in a manner that challenges the status of philosophical concepts. Derrida suggests that the metaphorical expression contains an excess of meaning, which cannot be properly grasped by the concept of metaphor, and that our most basic philosophical concepts such as truth are, in reality, dead or worn-out metaphors that have lost or erased their metaphorical qualities. The antithesis comes in the form of Ricoeur’s book-length study *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, particularly chapter eight (*The Rule of Metaphor* 303-71). One of the main points in Ricoeur’s study is that a philosophical concept might be articulated in terms of an old or worn metaphor, but the concept itself, so to speak, contains a dimension that is a genuine creation of new meaning. Thus, even if the concept is invariably articulated in terms of a dead metaphor, it cannot be reduced to metaphor. The quarrel was brought to a conclusion of sorts in Derrida’s essay “The Retrait of Metaphor” (*Psyche* 48-80), where Derrida suggests that he by and large agrees with Ricoeur, and the few points of disagreement are due to misconstructions of his position.

This exchange between Derrida and Ricoeur is interesting for several reasons. First, it illuminates their positions vis-à-vis metaphor and the interpretation of metaphor. Although the theory of metaphor is extraordinarily complex, one of the virtues of this debate is that the emphasis on metaphor is much more precise than, say, language, symbol, sign, text, or discourse. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the exchange is initiated by Ricoeur in a manner that is, frankly, uncharacteristic. However, it is worth noting here that the debate around metaphor had a prehistory, not only in their personal relationship insofar as Derrida was at one point Ricoeur’s assistant at the Sorbonne, but also insofar as Ricoeur and Derrida shared much of the same philosophical background (Michel 31-32). And at a later stage, Derrida and
Ricoeur enjoyed a second major debate, first privately then publicly, around the concept of forgiveness (Derrida, “The Word” 167-75).

In the study Reading Derrida and Ricoeur, which is the most exhaustive study of the relation between the two thinkers to date, Eftichis Pirovolakakis emphasizes that the exchange around metaphor can be considered a missed encounter:

Nor is a series of publications that appeared in the seventies on metaphor a debate, as in none of the three texts of this exchange do they fully engage with each other’s arguments. The first one, Derrida’s “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy” (1971), is a “deconstructive” interpretation of the vicissitudes of metaphor in philosophical discourse and does not contain any reference to Ricoeur. It is the latter who instigates the polemic by providing, in the eighth study of The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language (1975), a critical reading of Derrida’s essay. In no way does that reading amount to a detailed response to Derrida. Ricoeur chooses to focus on two very specific aspects of “White Mythology,” whose argument, moreover, he hastily assimilates to Heidegger’s conviction that the metaphorical exists only within the limits of metaphysics, and to which he devotes just a few pages. Finally, “The Retrait of Metaphor” (1978) was supposed to be Derrida’s rejoinder to Ricoeur’s polemical comments. Yet, the explicit references to Ricoeur are limited to a few observations to the effect that he mistakenly attributed to Derrida assertions that “White Mythology” was specifically intended to put into question. Derrida goes on to devote the largest part of his essay to a meticulous examination of certain Heideggerian motifs. As a result, their debate on metaphor could also be portrayed as a failed attempt to engage in constructive dialogue. (2)

To a large extent, I agree with Pirovolakis, and this exchange, to be sure, took place at a certain distance, with a certain restraint, and was conducted with a great measure of mutual respect. As Benoît Peeters remarks, Ricoeur came to regret the critique of Derrida: “In a late letter to his former assistant, he [Ricoeur] admitted that he ‘still regretted the unfortunate critique’ of Derrida’s work in The Rule of Metaphor, before adding: ‘You deftly picked it out and brilliantly lifted it up’” (527). Their differences, in retrospect, might appear secondary in view of their similarities.
Nevertheless, this paper argues that the “querelle” between Ricoeur and Derrida is not simply a missed encounter, where the two thinkers fail to engage with each other, but that it is restricted in the sense that it remains on a merely theoretical or speculative level. If this speculative debate is translated into practical terms, i.e., a practical interpretation of metaphors, then it becomes evident that the divergent theoretical positions support practices of interpretation that are not identical, for sure, but nevertheless convergent. The “querelle” is not an example of a missed encounter but an example of a hermeneutic conflict in which a speculative divergence is grounded in and supplemented by a practical convergence.

I

As mentioned earlier, the exchange around metaphor was not the first encounter between Ricoeur and Derrida. Here, a brief reflection on Ricoeur’s and Derrida’s positions in relation to Freud might serve as a context and an entry into the quarrel about metaphor (see also Pirovolakis; Bernstein). *The Rule of Metaphor*, according to Ricoeur, was a return to the problem of symbolism after a long detour through the problem of Freudian interpretation:

*Freud and Philosophy* in a certain sense got away from me, since it was supposed to be a response to *The Symbolism of Evil* but instead became a book on Freud. *The Rule of Metaphor* is, finally, in a critical relation to *The Symbolism of Evil* and to Eliade in the sense that in it I was asking myself if there was not a structure of language that had been studied more thoroughly, that was better known than the symbol—itself a vague notion used in so many different ways, from the symbols in chemistry to the symbol of the monarchy. By contrast, thanks to the long rhetorical tradition, we understand better how metaphor operates. I asked myself then whether I could not pour back into a kind of rhetorical receptacle all of the diffuse problematic of the symbol, providing it with a strong semantic framework. In fact, what I produced there was a semantic theory of symbols. (*Critique and Conviction* 81-82)

The question then arises whether there is a return to symbolism in *The Rule of Metaphor*, a more precise rethinking of symbolism, and to what extent the return to symbolism is formed by the detour through the problem of interpretation. Ricoeur’s *Freud and Philosophy* presents an original interpretation of Freud’s texts, a
philosophical interpretation, emphasizing an inner tension in Freud’s texts between “energetics” and “hermeneutics.” From the beginning, we may notice that the French title *De l’Interprétation* suggests that Ricoeur sought to foreground the problem of interpretation, the problem of a hermeneutic developed in relation to dreams and other manifestations of the unconscious, rather than a reading of Freud as the founder of psychoanalysis as therapeutic theory and practice (Iser 70-71). It is more about interpretation than it is about psychoanalysis.

Ricoeur’s book is organized in three main sections: problematic, analytic, and dialectic. The first and the third sections, the problematic and the dialectic, establish a general interpretive framework. The main part of the book is the second section, called “Analytic,” in which Ricoeur reconstructs the chronological development of Freud’s theory of the psyche from the early “Project” (1895) until the late *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). The Freudian theory of the psyche, according to Ricoeur, is characterized by a tension between a positivist pole and a non-positivist pole: on one hand, we have Freud’s ambition to conceptualize the psyche in strictly naturalistic terms as a quantitative neurological apparatus (energetics), and on the other his characteristic manner of decoding neurotic symptoms, dreams, and cultural artifacts (hermeneutics).

The Freudian discovery of the unconscious, according to Ricoeur, is articulated in a mixed discourse that vacillates between a positivist and a non-positivist pole, between “energetics” and “hermeneutics.” The tension in Freud’s texts between the two poles is articulated in several stages: from the early “Project” to the first topography, from the first to the second topography, and the late revision of the model through the introduction of the death drive. This tension between energetics and hermeneutics, according to Ricoeur, is a constant feature throughout Freud’s work; it is a tension that is never entirely resolved. The unconscious, according to Ricoeur, is precisely located at the intersection of the two trajectories (“Lectio magistralis” 77).

One of the important concepts in Ricoeur’s study is the notion of the symbol. It is carried over from his previous study *The Symbolism of Evil*. Initially, Ricoeur defines the symbol as “double or multiple-meaning expressions” that call for interpretation (*Freud and Philosophy* 13). At a later stage, Ricoeur describes the symbol as a dialectical synthesis of an archeological and a teleological vector, a “concrete” moment of a dialectical movement that indicates the “fullness or peak of mediation” (495). The symbol, in other words, enables Ricoeur to work through the Freudian lesson, to mediate between energetics and hermeneutics, and to assimilate this tension within a higher synthesis that casts new light on the problem of the self.
Derrida’s essay “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” which is part of *Writing and Difference*, navigates a similar territory. His point of departure is similar, if not identical, with the one outlined by Ricoeur: the Freudian theory of the psyche is split between two poles, a positivist-energetic and a non-positivist-hermeneutic pole. Or, in other words, it is a tension between force and significance, as indicated by the title of the opening essay in *Writing and Difference*. Derrida emphasizes on one hand “a neurological fable whose framework and intention, in certain respects, he [Freud] will never abandon,” and on the other a non-positivist mode of decoding signs, an interpretive procedure, a hermeneutic style (251). Derrida’s reading of Freud, up to this point, is very similar to the one we find in Ricoeur.

Once this framework has been established, however, Derrida abandons the simple bipolarity by emphasizing the “folds” or “loops” that complicate the dividing line. In other words, if the starting point is similar to Ricoeur’s interpretation of Freud, i.e., the tension between positivist energetics and anti-positivist hermeneutics, then Derrida’s essay goes in the exact opposite direction. Instead of seeking to mediate between the two poles, Derrida seeks to dig even deeper into the difference between the two. He seeks to emphasize a fourth “layer” in Freud’s texts, not the dialectical integration of the opposites within a symbolic discourse, as Ricoeur suggested, but an “arche-writing,” a “grammatological unconscious,” which precedes and conditions the very differentiation between energetics and hermeneutics: “Writing supplements perception before perception even appears to itself [is conscious of itself]” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 282). It is a primary supplement, a *mise en abyme*, a difference that resists all integration, all synthesis, all dialectical mediation.

In *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur distinguishes between two “hermeneutic styles”: one emphasizing the role of consciousness in the restoration of meaning through multiple detours, the other considering consciousness to be non-transparent, tainted by illusion, and a stranger in its own house (27). In this context, it is clear that Ricoeur, a distinguished representative of the former, considers Freud to be among the eminent representatives of the latter. In a gesture that is far too rare, the book delineates a trajectory that does not remain safely on one side of the dividing line; instead, the author crosses over to and seeks to learn from the other side, with the aim of mediating between the two in a higher dialectical synthesis. In certain respects, Derrida responds to Ricoeur’s project by theorizing an anti-symbolism, which resists, subverts, and delays all integration.

On this account, the difference between the two could not be clearer. Ricoeur reads Freud’s entire oeuvre as a chronological development of a theory of the psyche, a theory which is characterized by an inner tension between positivism and non-
positivism, between energetics and hermeneutics. Ricoeur, on his part, seeks to mediate between the two poles and overcome the tension in Freud’s theory of the psyche, which results in a theory on three levels: first, Freud’s positivist scientific theory of the psyche that emphasizes the psyche as an apparatus that receives and processes psychic energy (energetics); second, Freud’s non-positivist theory of the psyche, which emphasizes interpretive procedures of decoding dreams, symptoms, and cultural phenomena (hermeneutics); third, Ricoeur’s interpretation of Freud’s theory of the psyche, which seeks to mediate between the two poles and reinstate the autonomy of the self-conscious self. Derrida accepts the first two levels of Ricoeur’s interpretation of Freud; however, instead of Ricoeur’s mediation and recuperation of consciousness in terms of the symbol, he goes in the exact opposite direction, emphasizing a grammatological unconscious that conditions the very differentiation between positivist energetics and anti-positivist hermeneutics. Thus, while Ricoeur seeks to reinstate the rational ego as the master of its own house, Derrida seeks to outline an unconscious to the second degree, a dream within a dream, which resists all forms of recuperation or reinstatement.

Both Ricoeur and Derrida consider the Freudian theory of the psyche to be of utmost importance. Ricoeur identifies an inner tension in the Freudian theory of the psyche, which he seeks to overcome in the form of a theory of symbolism as the cornerstone of a recuperative hermeneutics. Derrida, in the exact opposite direction, seeks to undermine the self-transparent self, the autonomous subject, in a manner that radicalizes mainstream Freudian positions. If Ricoeur seeks to reinstate the autonomous subject, Derrida outlines a Freudianism to the second degree in the form of a grammatological unconscious.

However, in spite of these differences in their reading of Freud, it is worth noting that Ricoeur and Derrida share a common heritage from phenomenology. In particular, they both understand language and the generation of meaning as inherently temporal. Does the temporality of language, as Ricoeur suggests, imply a detour that leads back to a hermeneutic of the subject? Or does the temporality of language, as Derrida suggests, imply an infinite deferral of such a recuperation, which threatens to undermine all conceptual stability? And what are the broader implications of these different hermeneutic styles? These are some of the questions that are raised in the “querelle de la métaphore.”
In order to ground the discussion between Derrida and Ricoeur, I choose to discuss the theoretical positions in relation to a concrete example, or a set of examples. Here, I emphasize the poem “Blume” by Paul Celan, which is part of the third cycle of the collection *Sprachgitter* (1959).

**BLUME**

Der Stein.
Der Stein in der Luft, dem ich folgte.
Dein Aug, so blind wie der Stein.

Wir waren
Hände,
wir schöpften die Finsternis leer, wir fanden
das Wort, das den Sommer heraufkam:
Blume.

Blume—ein Blindenwort.
Dein Aug und mein Aug:
sie sorgen
für Wasser.

Wachstum.
Herzwand um Herzwand
blättert hinzu.

Ein Wort noch, wie dies, und die Hämmer
schwingen im Freien. (1-17)

In Michael Hamburger’s elegant translation, the poem reads as follows: “FLOWER
// The stone. // The stone in the air, which I followed. // Your eye, as blind as the stone.
// We were / hands, / we baled the darkness empty, we found / the word that ascended summer: / flower. // Flower—a blind man’s word. / Your eye and mine: / they see / to water. // Growth. // Heart wall upon heart wall / adds petals to it. // One more word like this, and the hammers / will swing over open ground” (115).
Initially, we might interpret Celan’s poem as a text, which is organized around the presentation and unfolding of a flower metaphor. The poem, on a thematic level, indicates a movement from stone to flower, from darkness to summer, and the crucial turning point is the “finding” of the word: flower. Subsequently, the flower grows, drawing on the water from eyes, indicating a movement towards greater freedom. As we know, the poem is partly based on biographical circumstances, insofar as Celan’s son pronounced as his first word “Blume” (or “fleur”). However, the poem is not merely a recounting of a biographical circumstance; it suggests that the entry into language, into the symbolic order, is a step toward potential emancipation. In other words, the flower, the “Blume,” is a metaphor that raises questions about language and meaning; the poem is a complex metapoetical text, which is organized around the central flower metaphor.

Ricoeur’s *The Rule of Metaphor* proposes to examine metaphor on three different levels: the level of the word, the level of the sentence, and the level of the text (or discourse). The theory of metaphor, according to these different levels of analysis, develops within the domains of rhetoric, semantics, and hermeneutics. One of the oldest conceptions of metaphor, as Ricoeur demonstrates in *The Rule of Metaphor*, considers it to be grounded on a principle of substitution, an operation of substituting one expression for another (Simms 62-77). A variant of this view considers the metaphor to be a comparison or a condensed simile: A is (like) B. The substitution is grounded on a similarity or a resemblance of the two expressions. Such an understanding of metaphor is conditioned by a distinction between the proper and the improper, between the literal and the figural sense:

Between the figurative sense of the borrowed word and the proper meaning of the absent word, there exists a relationship that can be called the “reason” (in the sense of rationale or basis) for the transposition. This reason constitutes a paradigm for the substitution of terms. In the case of metaphor, the paradigmatic structure is that of resemblance. This is the postulate of “the paradigmatic character of the trope.” (Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* 52)

Furthermore, the difference between the literal and the figural sense, which defines the classical understanding of metaphor as substitution, is simultaneously the principle that guides the interpretation of metaphors:
To explain (or understand) a trope is to be guided by the trope’s “reason,” that is, the paradigm of substitution, in finding the absent proper word; thus, it is to restore the proper term for which an improper term had been substituted. In principle the restitutive paraphrase is exhaustive, so the algebraic sum of substitution and subsequent restitution is zero. Here we have the postulate of “exhaustive paraphrase.” (52)

This conception of metaphor, which is part of the heritage from Aristotle, has received a number of theoretical reformulations. In particular, Ricoeur subscribes to Max Black’s conception of metaphor in terms of interaction. The point here is that the semantics of metaphor is not exhausted by reference to a principle of substitution between one and another sign, between the literal and the figural sense, but must be expanded in terms of interaction between the linguistic expression and the contextual determination and counter-determination within the sentence. Thus, the metaphor signals its appearance as a breach in the semantic expectations of a specific context. The substitution-metaphor operates on the level of signs: the metaphor is conceived as a substitution of one sign for another. By contrast, the interaction-metaphor operates on a sentence-level, where the metaphor is a break with the contextual expectations: the metaphor is conceived as an interaction with a context.

Some of the implications of Ricoeur’s theoretical distinction between substitution-metaphor and interaction-metaphor become clearer when we consider the poetic metaphor “flower” (Blume). According to the classical substitution-theory, the “flower” metaphor might be read as a figural expression that represents a sense of hope. The growing flower, accordingly, stands for a growing or rekindled hope for the future. According to the interaction-theory, the “flower” metaphor does not merely represent a sense of psychological hope, but it also metapoetically represents a sense of linguistic meaning, which had previously been absent. These metalinguistic dimensions are indicated by expressions such as “wir fanden/ das Wort,” “Blindenwort,” and “Ein Wort noch.” Thus, the “flower” is a metaphor that indicates a sense of linguistic meaning. Both of these senses of the metaphor—the flower as hope and the flower as meaning—receive yet another layer when we consider the “flower” metaphor as a nexus of intertextual associations. As several commentators have pointed out, Celan’s poem alludes to a famous line in Hölderlin’s poem “Brod und Wein” (1884):

. . . nun aber nennt er sein Liebstes,  
Nun, nun müssen dafür Worte, wie Blumen, entstehn. (stanza 5, 17-18)
Initially, the verse lines seem to present an analogy between words and flowers, between language and non-linguistic reality. Paul de Man’s discussion of Hölderlin’s verse turns on an asymmetrical parallelism between language and nature:

The word “entstehn” establishes another fundamental distinction. The two terms of the simile are not said to be identical with one another (the word = the flower), nor analogous in their general mode of being (the word is like the flower), but specifically in the way they originate (the word originates like the flower). The similarity between the two terms does not reside in their essence (identity), or in their appearance (analogy), but in the manner in which both originate. . . . It would follow then, since the intent of the poetic word is to originate like the flower, that it strives to banish all metaphor, to become entirely literal. (3-4)

In a note, de Man emphasizes: “The line is ambiguous, depending on whether one gives the verb ‘entstehn’ a single or a double subject. It can mean: words will originate that are like flowers (‘Worte, die wie Blumen sind, müssen dafür entstehn’). But the meaning is much richer if one reads it: words will have to originate in the same way that flowers originate (‘Worte müssen dafür entstehn wie Blumen entstehn’). Syntax and punctuation allow for both readings” (291n1).

The natural flower, according to de Man, emerges as an epiphany, as a disclosure of its own idea, its principle. The poetic expression seeks to emerge in a similar manner, but it is ultimately doomed in its endeavor to emerge like the flower. While the flower emerges from the same, from its own idea, the word emerges from something different, from something other than itself. “This type of imagery is grounded in the intrinsic ontological primacy of the natural object. Poetic language seems to originate in the desire to draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the object” (de Man 3-4). Thus, like Sartre in L’Être et le Néant (1943), de Man falls back into an ontological dualism between in-itself (nature) and for-itself (unhappy consciousness in Sartre, the romantic image in de Man), with the latter longing for a return to the in-itself. The relation between natural flower and poetic word, according to de Man, is determined by an asymmetric parallelism (Andersen 165-72).

Gottfried Benn maintains in his famous speech “Probleme der Lyrik” that the expression “like” (wie) is a breach of the poetic vision and a weakness of the creative transformation (513). The visionary power of poetry is weakened by the simile which emphasizes analogical or identical aspects at the cost of differences. Heidegger
objects that, although it may be accurate in certain instances, such an interpretation is inappropriate in the case of Hölderlin’s verse:

Wir blieben in der Metaphysik hängen, wollten wir dieses Nennen Hölderlins in der Wendung »Worte, wie Blumen« für eine Metapher halten. (Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* 207)

Initially, we might paraphrase Heidegger’s statement along the following lines: if we interpret Hölderlin’s line “Worte, wie Blumen” as a metaphor, or in terms of metaphor, then we remain stuck in metaphysics. Here, to begin with, it is perhaps worthwhile to abstain from translating the passage, at least for two reasons. Heidegger’s idiosyncratic language is near-impossible to translate without an extensive number of footnotes unpacking some of the semantic nuances. Second, the movement of translation is, if not identical, then at least closely affiliated with the movement of the metaphor. In this context, although it is unclear what exactly Heidegger understands by metaphor and by metaphysics, it is fairly clear that he seeks to associate metaphor and metaphysics in some manner. Perhaps we might understand the association of the two terms in the following loose or approximate sense: if we understand Hölderlin’s poetic line concerning words and flowers in terms of metaphor, i.e., as a process of substitution between the literal and the figural sense, then we remain within the horizon of metaphysics as a set of presuppositions concerning physical and non-physical being as well as the difference between the two domains.

In the book *Der Satz vom Grund*, in which one of the issues is to hear the difference in tonality between “Nichts ist ohne Grund” and “Nichts ist ohne Grund,” Heidegger discusses a listening and visual mode of thinking of the relation (*Einklang*) between “ist” and “Grund.” He writes:

Fassen wir das Denken als eine Art Hören und Sehen, dann wird das sinnliche Hören und Sehen übernommen und hinübergenommen in den Bereich des nicht-sinnlichen Vernehmens, d.h. des Denkens. Solches Hinübertragen heisst griechisch *metaphérein*. Die Gelehrten sprache nennt eine solche Übertragung Metapher. (Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* 86-87)

Heidegger maintains that hearing is never simply a mere sensuous activity. The ear is a necessary condition for the realization of hearing; yet, it is not the ear, but a
subject, an I, that listens and hears. Thus, a “listening thinking,” according to Heidegger, does not amount to a figural or metaphorical listening:

Die Vorstellung von »übertragen« und von der Metapher beruht auf der Unterscheidung, wenn nicht gar Trennung des Sinnlichen und Nichtsinnlichen als zweier für sich bestehender Bereiche. (88-89)

Here, in this quasi-definition of metaphor, Heidegger establishes a fairly straightforward equivalence between the metaphor and the distinction between sensible and non-sensible. The metaphor “beruht auf”—relies upon or is conditioned by—the distinction between sensible and non-sensible. The expression “beruht auf” indicates a relation in which something is conditioned by something else, in which something finds its ground in something else. Thus, the distinction between sensible and non-sensible is the ground, the foundation, the condition of the metaphor. However, as we recall, it is precisely such a “grounding” rationality that Heidegger questions in *Der Satz vom Grund*. If Heidegger maintains that the metaphor is grounded in and by the distinction between sensible and non-sensible, then it seems inevitable that his quasi-definition of metaphor is the precise location of a strange and paradoxical aporia.

However, this aporia is seemingly glossed over in his famous dictum: “Das Metaphorische gibt es nur innerhalb der Metaphysik” (89). The “innerhalb,” which employs a spatial metaphor, describes the relation between “the metaphorical” (*das Metaphorische*) and “metaphysics” (*der Metaphysik*). Here, again, by employing a spatial metaphor to describe the relation between metaphor and metaphysics, Heidegger seems to run into an aporia, perhaps an unavoidable aporia, in which the writing contradicts the statement. Thus, in Heidegger’s ruminations on metaphor and metaphysics, he describes the relation partly in terms of grounding/grounded (*beruht auf*) and partly in terms of inside/outside (*innerhalb*).

Throughout the exchange between Ricoeur and Derrida, there is an explicit, as well as implicit, taking position vis-à-vis Heidegger’s statement from *Der Satz vom Grund* that the metaphorical only exists, only is given, or only appears within metaphysics. Previously, Ricoeur and Derrida had disagreed on the interpretation of Freud: Ricoeur had established a paradigm of interpretation, which Derrida had challenged directly. Now, in the debate about metaphor, the roles have been reversed: Ricoeur directly challenges Heidegger’s position, which he claims is also, implicitly if not explicitly, the position of Derrida. In opposition to Heidegger’s association of metaphor and metaphysics, Ricoeur maintains that Heidegger’s quasi-definition of
metaphor in terms of the distinction between sensible and non-sensible does not account in a satisfactory manner for the wide range of semantic nuances of metaphor.

Heidegger’s famous statement concerning metaphor and metaphysics, according to Ricoeur,

suggests that the transgression of metaphor and that of metaphysics are but one and the same transfer. Several things are implied here: first, that the ontology implicit in the entire rhetorical tradition is that of Western “metaphysics” of the Platonic or neo-Platonic type, where the soul is transported from the visible world to the invisible world; second, that metaphorical means transfer from the proper sense to the figurative sense; finally, that both transfers constitute one and the same Übertragung. (The Rule of Metaphor 331)

In this passage, Ricoeur explicates the meaning of the “beruht auf” and the “innerhalb” as an identification of two distinct processes. Heidegger’s position maintains an “equivalence of the two transfers,” which, according to Ricoeur, is the “metaphysical transfer of the sensible to the non-sensible, metaphorical transfer of the literal to the figurative” (The Rule of Metaphor 332). Thus, Ricoeur suggests that Heidegger’s association of metaphor and metaphysics in terms of a strict equivalence is problematic for several reasons: first, it is questionable whether these two processes have anything but superficial resemblance in common, and, second, even if the case could be made for a deep or substantial association of the two processes, it would strictly speaking only be applicable to a definition of metaphor as a word-for-word substitution. Thus, Ricoeur emphasizes that Heidegger’s statement concerning metaphor is restricted to the substitution-metaphor, but it does not account for the interaction-metaphor.

Ricoeur unpacks Heidegger’s statement as follows: Heidegger states that the substitution-metaphor is given or appears within metaphysics (understood in Neo-Platonic terms), but he says nothing about the interaction-metaphor or metaphor as semantic interaction between expression and context. Thus, by sharply distinguishing substitution-metaphor and interaction-metaphor, Ricoeur effectively circumscribes Heidegger’s claim that there is some deep association between metaphor and metaphysics.

One might assume that Ricoeur’s position is further strengthened by the earlier observation that Heidegger’s determination of metaphor in terms of its “grounding” in the distinction between sensible and non-sensible, or the spatial relation of
metaphor “within” metaphysics, reveals an inner aporia, or set of aporias, whereby the text contradicts its statement. In this disputation between Heidegger and Ricoeur, it is Ricoeur, no doubt, who comes out as the most convincing.

Ricoeur’s interpretation of Heidegger is animated by a further claim: Derrida takes over and extends Heidegger’s association of metaphor and metaphysics. Thus, to challenge Heidegger’s position is simultaneously to challenge Derrida’s position. However, it is noteworthy that Derrida, in his discussion of Heidegger’s association of metaphor and metaphysics, maintains a certain distance, even reservation, concerning the precise manner of association between the two terms:

This explains the distrust that the concept of metaphor inspires in Heidegger. In Der Satz vom Grund he insists above all on the opposition sensory/nonsensory, an important, but neither the only, nor the first, nor the most determining characteristic of the value of metaphor. (Derrida, Margins of Philosophy 226n29)

These reservations, these qualifications, indicate that Derrida is well aware of the restrictions, the limitations, and the weaknesses in Heidegger’s correlation—the “beruht auf” and the “innerhalb”—of metaphor and metaphysics. Nevertheless, while Derrida remains skeptical of the letter, he maintains the spirit of the correlation between metaphor and metaphysics. In other words, Derrida seeks to provide a better conception of metaphor, one that draws on Nietzsche’s famous description of the worn-out metaphor, which is able to account for such a correlation between metaphor and metaphysics.

III

From this point onwards, when Celan’s poem “Blume” alludes to Hölderlin’s famous verse lines in “Brod und Wein,” it is not merely a recuperation of the simile between words and flowers, but also, and more importantly, a grammatical quotation: “Ein Wort noch, wie dies, und...” The demonstrative pronoun “dies” does not simply refer to another word, to “Blume,” but indicates a grammatical location, which remains open for a word to come. In other words, Celan’s poetic flower indicates a sense of psychological hope, a sense of renewed meaning, and a grammatical anticipation of a word to come, which, arguably, and with a number of restrictions, might point beyond metaphysics as a form of utopia (Lyon 69). Celan’s poem, at this stage of our interpretation, adds a utopian dimension to the psychological sense of
rekindled hope and the metalinguistic sense of renewal of meaning. But, unsurprisingly, it does not stop here.

If the semantic density of the poem’s flower metaphor was already manifest in the intertextual allusions to Hölderlin’s famous verse lines in “Brod und Wein,” it becomes even clearer in the allusions to a famous passage in Mallarmé’s “Crise de vers.”

A quoi bon la merveille de transposer un fait de nature en sa presque disparition vibratoire selon le jeu de la parole, cependant; si ce n’est pour qu’en émane, sans la gêne d’un proche ou concret rappel, la notion pure.

Je dis: une fleur! et hors de l’oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d’autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l’absente de tous bousquets. (279)

Several Celan scholars have pointed to the intertextual relations between Celan’s and Mallarmé’s texts (Meinecke 245; Bogumil 29-30; Fioretos 172). Initially, we might discern four main elements in this passage: the bouquet of flowers (un fait de nature), the linguistic articulation (le jeu de la parole), the recall (hors de l’oubli), and the mild or pure idea (la notion pure). We might interpret this passage as an interaction between nature and language, between presence and absence, allocating a certain priority to the natural phenomenon, which the linguistic articulation, “le jeu de la parole,” negates, thereby preparing the appearance, or more precisely the recall, of a synthesis, the “notion pure,” which mediates, overcomes, and sublates the difference between nature and language. This model of interpretation has been widely influential: modernism in general, and Symbolism in particular, rejects the mimetic-referential paradigm of realism, promoting instead a vision of poetic language as a creation of an autonomous symbolic dimension that anticipates—or recalls—something new.

Here, attempting to displace Mallarmé from mainstream modernism, one might object that such an interpretation does not sufficiently take into account the precise formulation “en sa presque disparition vibratoire,” which indicates an unfinished process of disappearance. The natural phenomenon is marked in language as a trace, a musical effect, an echo, which is neither presence (as natural phenomenon) or absence (as linguistic meaning), but remains in a state of indeterminacy, in a state of becoming, suspended between nature and language, between presence and absence. The difference between nature and language is the precise location of an “arche-
writing” or a “grammatological unconscious” that conditions the differentiation between the two domains in the first place. In other words, if the modernist reading of Mallarmé operates with three dimensions—a natural flower, a linguistic flower, and a symbolic flower that synthesizes the natural and linguistic flowers—then a deconstructive reading adds another layer, an “arche-flower,” which is located somewhere in the grey area between natural and linguistic flower.

This layer of meaning is radically unstable and polysemous. Perhaps this becomes clearer when we contemplate a certain ambiguity in the expression “Je dis: une fleur!” Initially, we might read the colon as a continuous movement, which unfolds or explicates that which is said: the speaking subject pronounces the words “une fleur.” However, this colon is unstable, polysemous, and we might read it in an entirely different sense, in a different direction, whereby a much broader layer of meaning becomes apparent: it is “je dis,” which is a flower. Here, in a dizzying reversal, it is the notion of an autonomous subject, appearing transparent to itself in the act of speaking, which becomes problematic insofar as it is a metaphor, or embedded in a metaphorical textuality, which it can neither avoid nor master. This metaphorical textuality, of course, is not to be confused with the restricted metaphor, which the speaking subject is able to articulate, precisely because it is the speaking subject itself, the “je dis,” which is revealed as a metaphor that has effaced its own metaphorical characteristics. We might describe this as Mallarmé’s poetic anti-cogito.

It is this layer of meaning, this dizzying perspective, which becomes evident at the end of Derrida’s essay “White Mythology”:

Such a flower always bears its double within itself. . . . And it can always become a dried flower in a book. There is always, absent from every garden, a dried flower in a book. (Margins of Philosophy 271)

A book, not to be confused with a text, is already marked by a metaphor, neither present nor absent, but latent, inscribed as a still vibrating trace, which has effaced its own metaphorical textuality. The reversal in Mallarmé’s text, the reversal from the subject saying “a flower” to the “I say” as a flower, might be read as an indication of a broader reversal between concept and metaphor: rhetorical-philosophical concepts of metaphor are already inscribed in the distinctions between literal and figural meaning, which they seek to grasps:

Each time that a rhetoric defines metaphor, not only is a philosophy implied, but also a conceptual network in which philosophy itself has
been constituted. Moreover each thread in this network forms a turn, or one might say a metaphor, if that notion were not too derivative here. What is defined, therefore, is implied in the defining of the definition. (230; emphasis in original)

Thus, while Derrida rejects the letter, he maintains and improves the spirit of Heidegger’s propositions concerning the relation between metaphor and metaphysics. The innovation, on Derrida’s part, consists in extending the famous text by Nietzsche on “Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” where truth is considered to be a moveable army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms, where truth and other metaphysical concepts are metaphors that have become worn out and have lost their sensuous force (Metaphern, die abgenutzt und sinnlich kraftlos geworden sind) (vol. 1, 880-81). In another text, less famous but equally radical, Nietzsche claims that time, space, and causality are mere epistemic metaphors (Erkenntnis metaphern) that we employ to reflexively interpret things (mit denen wir die Dinge uns deuten) (vol. 7, 484). Thus, drawing on Nietzsche, Derrida can maintain that Heidegger, on this particular point, was too pious: it is not merely the case that metaphors only exist, only appear, within metaphysics; rather, metaphysical concepts such as truth, time, space, and causality are metaphors that have erased their own metaphoricity.

Here, there is no question of limiting the dialectical relation between concept and metaphor, whereby the concept via negativa is able to delimit and incorporate the metaphor in its domain, but rather of pushing the relation beyond its boundaries and towards a point of reversal, where the relation itself is turned upside down and the concept inscribed in a general metaphorical textuality. The metaphorical textuality, the reservoir of dead metaphors, is the domain of a grammatological unconscious, which manifests itself behind our backs and against our intentions; it is a realm of unrestricted polyvalence, and philosophical or metaphysical concepts, according to Derrida, are constituted through a necessary limitation and repression of this unrestricted polyvalence. Metaphysics, according to Derrida, is constituted through an original repression of metaphor.

It is this position that provokes Ricoeur to no end, and this is the real target of the book The Rule of Metaphor. In his discussion of Derrida’s essay “White Mythology,” Ricoeur maintains:

Two assertions can be discerned in the tight fabric of Derrida’s demonstration. The first has to do with the efficacy of worn-out metaphor in philosophical discourse, and the second with the deep-
The second assertion concerning a unity between the metaphorical transfer of literal and figural meaning and the metaphysical transfer of sensible and intelligible being, according to Ricoeur, is shared by Derrida and Heidegger (Gasché 301-18; Cazeaux 175-98). However, Ricoeur recognizes that the first assertion concerning the effects of dead metaphor in philosophical discourse is far more important: “We must understand that here it is not a question of the genesis of empirical concepts but of the primary philosophemes, those that define the field of metaphysics: *theoria*, *eidos*, *logos*, etc. The thesis can be stated as follows: wherever metaphor fades, there the metaphysical concept rises up” (The Rule of Metaphor 338). The issue, for Ricoeur, is that the “primary philosophemes” such as “truth” are seemingly reduced to resurrections of dead metaphors.

Ricoeur maintains a sharp distinction between two analytical levels, between the sign and the sentence, thereby enabling a sharp distinction between the phenomenon of wear and tear as simple catachresis and the phenomenon of proper conceptualization. Even if metaphorical transfer and dialectical conceptualization are both operational in the worn or dead metaphor, they are nevertheless distinct operations: “If these two operations were not distinct, we could not even speak of the concept of wearing away, nor of the concept of metaphor; in truth, there could be no philosophical terms. That there are philosophical terms is due to the fact that a concept can be active as thought in a metaphor which is itself dead” (346). In spite of the wear on metaphor, the concept is able to renew itself through the revival of the dead metaphor: “Applying these remarks on the formation of the concept in its schema to the concept of metaphor is enough to dispel the paradox of the metaphoricity of all definitions of metaphor. Speaking metaphorically of metaphor is not at all circular, since the act of positing the concept proceeds dialectically from metaphor itself” (346). Hereby Ricoeur maintains that the meaning of the metaphysical concept is distinct from and independent of the material signifier.

One of the dividing points between Ricoeur and Derrida is whether the meaning of a concept is independent of or dependent on the materiality of language. According to Ricoeur, the distinction between different levels, between the substitution-metaphor and the interaction-metaphor, allows us to conceive of a concept as a creation or renewal of meaning taking place in a dead metaphor. The concept, in other words, is bound to but distinct from the materiality of language. By contrast, Derrida maintains, at least in this text, that concepts are embedded in textual situations, which
the concept can neither exhaust nor transcend. In other words, the issue is whether the meaning of a concept is autonomous vis-à-vis the materiality of language: Ricoeur maintains that the concept is able to establish autonomy of meaning through dead metaphors, while Derrida maintains that concepts, on principle, are unable to transcend the materiality of language.

IV

In a restricted sense, the issue at stake is a theory of poetic metaphors and the implications for the interpretation of such poetic metaphors. However, both parties to the debate understand the issue to be much more than that. Taking the lead from Nietzsche, the debate is whether truth, time, space, and causality are mere metaphors that we employ in our interpretations of things. In Ricoeur’s terms, the issue in The Rule of Metaphor is to rethink the semantics of symbols, but with metaphor as a more restricted and precise framework. In Derrida’s terms, the issue is whether philosophical concepts are able to transcend the materiality of language and establish a domain of rationality that is universally valid. The “querelle de la métaphore,” it seems, has less to do with metaphors in a strictly poetological sense than with the possibility of metaphysical concepts to establish autonomous meaning. Ricoeur defends an “idealistic” position that seeks to establish universally valid norms of rationality. Derrida, by contrast, promotes an “anti-idealistic” position that maintains how concepts are veiled metaphors, how norms are veiled expressions of particular interests.

The question that I would like to emphasize, while bracketing the wider philosophical implications of this debate, is whether and to what extent the speculative or theoretical differences have implications for practical interpretations of poetic metaphors. In order to frame the debate within a context of practical exegesis, I propose the hermeneutic circle as a useful guideline through this debate. The hermeneutic circle, as is well known, is one of the oldest principles of interpretation which proposes to interpret the meaning of specific parts in terms of the whole and the whole in terms of the parts. The concept of the hermeneutic circle, of course, is itself an example of a concept that operates within a dead or worn metaphor.

The concept of the hermeneutic circle might be extended in at least four directions, which concern the specific content of the whole in question. First, we might interpret the work as an expressive part of an oevre that spans the entire productive life of the author. Second, the work might be seen as a formal whole, an
autonomous aesthetic entity, which establishes the framework for the interpretation of specific parts. Third, we might consider the work as a part that reflects, directly or indirectly, in one way or another, the broader historical context. And, fourth, we might consider the work to be part of an unruly intertextual network, which subverts “genealogical trees” in favor of “rhizomes,” to borrow a term from Deleuze and Guattari.

These four directions of the hermeneutic circle establish a first “horizontal” plane of interpretation. A second “vertical” plane might be said to intersect with the first. On the vertical plane, the first position is established by discourses that emphasize the literal or non-figurative sense as unambiguous referentiality to nonlinguistic experience. The second position is associated with the “hermeneutics of suspicion” whereby an apparent or surface level of meaning is supplemented by a latent or hidden level of meaning. The Freudian interpretation of dreams, in many ways, establishes a paradigmatic model for such an interpretation of a hidden depth.

Derrida, in many ways, belongs to the hermeneutics of suspicion, which considers the conscious ego to be a stranger in its own house. However, it is more accurate to characterize his position as a “suspicion of suspicion,” a hermeneutics of suspicion to the second degree. Thus, it is not merely the patient, but also, and more importantly, the analyst, who is caught in the web of the unconscious. Derrida’s innovation is what we might describe as a grammatological unconscious, which concerns a form of writing or tracing or intertextuality as a domain of unbounded signification that subsists underneath the surface of the text in a traditional sense. Who speaks in and through this form of textuality? The answer, according to Derrida, is a “neutral voice” that belongs to nobody in particular.

By contrast, Ricoeur seeks to recuperate the subject from the various modalities of the unconscious. Ricoeur considers both the immediate experiences of self-consciousness (the literal sense as reference to nonlinguistic experience) as well as the experiences of the alienated consciousness (the Freudian interpretation of dreams, the Derridean interpretation of textuality) to be particular stages of a development; they are manifestations of a process, an extended detour, which passes from immediate subject through alienated subject to reflected subject of language, action, and responsibility. Hermeneutics, in this sense, is an extended detour to oneself.

In short, we might describe the hermeneutic circle as an interpretive principle that extends horizontally in the form of expressive, formal, contextual, and intertextual modes of interpretation; however, this horizontal extension is supplemented by a vertical extension, where immediate consciousness (literal
referentiality) and suspicious consciousness (Freud) is further intensified in terms of hyper-suspicious consciousness (Derrida) and symbolic consciousness (Ricoeur).

One might say that Celan’s poem “Blume” complicates a simple or straightforward conception of referentiality as a correspondence between linguistic and nonlinguistic reality, between language and experience. This complication is manifest in the density of the poem’s central metaphor, which implies at least four dimensions: a natural flower, a linguistic flower, a symbolic flower that synthesizes the natural and the linguistic flower, and, finally, a grammatological or intertextual flower that implies a radical semantic multivocity. We might interpret these different layers of metaphor as indicating a sense of hope, a sense of renewal of language and meaning, a sense of utopia, and a sense of intertextuality whereby the speaking subject is merely a point of intersection in a strictly unbounded domain of impersonal discourse.

The density of the central metaphor does not mean that referentiality is suspended; nor does it mean that all linguistic referentiality is folded back into itself in solipsistic autoreferential statements; rather, it means that poetic referentiality is given a temporal inflection. If we think of the poem’s referential structure as an appointment with nonlinguistic referentiality, as an encounter, an event, then in a sense, the poetic language is both “too early,” “too late,” and “on time,” which combines a prefigurative, a refigurative, and a configurative relation to nonlinguistic referents.

When considering the semantic density that characterizes the central metaphor in Celan’s poem “Blume,” it seems fruitful to draw on Derrida’s notion of metaphoricity as a grammatological unconscious, as an unbounded realm of multivocity, which disperses and multiplies meaning in all directions. Celan’s flower associates to Hölderlin’s words-like-flowers, Mallarmé’s poetic anti-cogito, as well as many others. His flower is blooming in many directions. However, following Ricoeur’s interpretive strategy, it seems equally fruitful to attempt to reunite the multiple fragments of meaning into some sort of coherent interpretation. These two interpretive strategies, while theoretically divergent, are practically convergent.

**Conclusion**

The exchange between Ricoeur and Derrida around metaphor is an extraordinary chapter in modern intellectual history. Both thinkers establish positions that go beyond the paradigm of Freudian psychoanalysis, where the discourse of the analysand is governed by unconscious forces, while the analyst is able to decode the
hidden or latent meaning of the manifest discourse. For Derrida, the goal is to expose the second-degree illusions of the analyst, who claims to be positioned outside of that which is analyzed. For Ricoeur, the goal is to work through and overcome the difference between analysand and analyst, reinstating the subject as a reflected agent of interpretation and action.

Derrida’s emphasis on metaphors that subvert the domain of concepts is an extraordinary line of thought that opens new avenues for the interpretation of poetry and other complex symbolic entities. The object of interpretation contains an excess, which the interpreter is unable to exhaust in a conceptual discourse. The strength of his position is the practice of reading, which is characterized by an emphasis on “hypersignificant parts” that have escaped the attention of more traditional strategies of reading. However, a weakness is that his position rarely accommodates the demand, or the desire, whether justified or unjustified, for integration of the semantic parts into a semantic whole. Ricoeur, by contrast, emphasizes the whole, and the ongoing integration of new semantic parts into the semantic whole. This extends not merely to specific metaphors, but characterizes his philosophical project in general. As Johann Michel writes: “Ricoeur’s hermeneutics seeks to provide a mediation between tradition, modernity, and post-modernity” (66). In this sense, his philosophical position and his reading strategy is less subversive, more accommodating.

The theoretical differences between Ricoeur and Derrida when it comes to metaphor ought to be viewed, at least partly, from a practical perspective, i.e., the practical interpretation of metaphors, where their divergence is much less dramatic than it might first appear. The strength of Derrida’s position, on this particular point, is an emphasis on the hypersignificant parts that escape our concepts. The strength of Ricoeur’s position is the labor of the concept that seeks to mediate between oppositions and integrate the various semantic parts into a new whole. In other words, they emphasize different aspects of the hermeneutic circle. The central question in this debate between Derrida and Ricoeur is not their theoretical or speculative differences, but the discovery of a “deeper” agreement in terms of the demand for interpretation that follows from these speculations. When we seek to translate Derrida’s and Ricoeur’s conceptions into practical interpretations of specific metaphors, their speculative divergence appears less important than their practical convergence.

Works Cited


### About the Author

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