Rhythm from Art to Philosophy – Nietzsche (1867-1888) – part 6

Wednesday 1 June 2016, by Pascal Michon

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Rhuthmology as Deconstruction?

How to assess the larger meaning of this philological critique of modern *metric* and reconstruction of Greek *rhythmic*? The energy and time Nietzsche spent studying the latter simultaneously with his studies on pre-Socratic thinkers and on the origin of Tragedy suggest that all these subjects were in his mind closely related to each other and, therefore, that Heidegger's interpretation missed an important point: the tight connection between his theory of art, his Heraclitean and Democritean ontology, and last but not least his concrete philological research on Greek language and poetry. Does that make the young Nietzsche, as it has been recently claimed by Helmut Müller-Sievers, a forerunner of Deconstruction?

Nietzsche's critique of modern *metric* and his reconstruction of the Greek *rhythmic* surely subvert, as the latter rightly notes, some basic beliefs of German Idealism (Müller-Sievers, 2015, p. 143). But, first of all, for reasons that have been previously explained (see chap. 2 and 3) and for the sake of a better comprehension of language and art, we must not put, as Helmut Müller-Sievers does, Schlegel and Humboldt in the same "Idealist" boat with Novalis, Hegel and Schelling. Neither should we set a complete opposition, "a tremendous chasm" as he calls it, between *The Birth of Tragedy*, apparently heavily burdened by romanticist metaphysics, and Nietzsche's contemporary research on rhythm, which would announce a different and more sophisticated comprehension of language and art.

> The *Theorie [der quantierenden Rhythmik]* presents a number of arguments that run strictly contrary to the official "fertile" reading of *The Birth of Tragedy*. [....] Nietzsche's "official" theses on the relationship between music and language in ancient Greece seem to belong to this tradition of penetrating the secret of tragedy by means of a philosophy of history. (Müller-Sievers, 2015, p. 143)

Whereas in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche complies with the Idealist tradition of philosophy of history, Helmut Müller-Sievers argues, the method he uses in his notes on rhythm to measure the opposition between the Moderns and the Ancients is "in the most general sense, grammatological." Nietzsche would reject traditional theories about the origin and function of classical meter "because they rely on the voice, more precisely on stress, as the decisive principle of order." (Müller-Sievers, 2015; similarly, Porter claims that Greek rhythmic was "not based on criteria of sound," Porter, 2000a, p. 143)

But this entails attributing to Nietzsche Derridean-like intentions he obviously never had. Moreover, voice is not the same as stress. If stress and change in pitch were not meaningful in Greek and Latin classical poetry, this does not mean, first, that they did not exist at all (as Nietzsche himself notices in a passage already quoted above, KGA II3, p. 401) and second, more decisively, that poetry was not voiced and heard. What Nietzsche did claim was only that the meaningfulness of poetic discourse depended on another aspect of speech, namely length, proportion and speed variation of the syllables, but not that it did not "rely on voice." If Nietzsche rejected most metric theories of his time because they were based on modern music, this did not mean sheer rejection of sound.

This kind of grammatological reading, just like Heidegger's purely ontological interpretation to which it is actually closely related, actually misses the most important point, which is the un-recognized tense relation between Nietzsche and an anti-idealist *poetic* tradition—in the sense of poetics—going from Aristotle to Diderot, then to some German Romantics and Humboldt—a relation interestingly parallel, incidentally, to Nietzsche's interest in the ancient atomist and materialist theories also singled out by Diderot and Goethe.

It is true that Nietzsche is usually—and accurately—considered as a proponent of a radically conventionalist and nominalist conception of language that aims at explaining why the latter is not trustworthy. In this respect, he can rightly be considered as a forerunner of poststructuralism or postmodernism.

As early as 1872 in his notes on *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Nietzsche considers that language is made of "words" and is "only symbolic," i.e. consisting in gross abstractions, unable to do justice to the "Being." Therefore, human cognition, as Kant has shown, is limited by its essential subjectivity, but mere knowledge of this limitations won't be enough to feel the gap caused by the essential inconsistency of language. The conclusion is self-defeating but does not repel Nietzsche: "Cognition and 'Being' are the most contradictory of all spheres."

> Words are only symbols for the relations of things among themselves and to us, and nowhere touch absolute truth; and now to crown all, the word "Being" designates only the most general relation, which connects all things, and so does the word "Not-Being." If however the Existence of the things themselves be unprovable, then the relation of the things among themselves, the so-called "Being" and "Not-Being," will not bring us any nearer to the land of truth. By means of words and ideas we shall never get behind the wall of the relations, let us say into some fabulous primal cause of things, and even in the pure forms of the sensitive faculty and of the intellect, in space, time and causality we gain nothing, which might resemble a "*Veritas æterna?*" It is absolutely impossible for the subject to see and discern something beyond himself, so impossible that Cognition and "Being" are the most contradictory of all spheres. (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 11, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge)

In *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense* (1873), Nietzsche explains, in the same vein, why language is one of the main sources of deception of the thought.

First of all, words are "arbitrary conventions," i.e. results of "subjective" choices, which entail, according to him, there incapacity to reach the real, the "thing-in-itself."

> If truth alone had been the deciding factor in the genesis of language, and if the standpoint of certainty had been decisive for designations, then how could we still dare to say "the stone is hard," as if "hard" were something otherwise familiar to us, and not merely a totally subjective stimulation! We separate things according to gender, designating the tree as masculine and the plant as feminine. What arbitrary assignments! How far this oversteps the canons of certainty! We speak of a "snake": this designation touches only upon its ability to twist itself and could therefore also fit a worm. What arbitrary differentiations! What one-sided preferences, first for this, then for that property of a thing! The different languages, set side by side, show that what matters with words is never the truth, never an adequate expression; else there would not be so many languages. The "thing-in-itself" (for that is what pure truth, without consequences, would be) is quite incomprehensible to the creators of language and not at all worth aiming for. (*On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, § 1, trans. W.A. Haussmann)

Second—as in the previous text—words are "names of classes," i.e. abstract concepts unable to account for "the unique and wholly individualized original experience."

> Every word immediately becomes a concept, inasmuch as it is not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience to which it owes its birth, but must at the same time fit innumerable, more or less similar cases—which means, strictly speaking, never equal—in other words, a lot of unequal cases. Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal. (*On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, § 1, trans. W.A. Haussmann)

Although concepts are abstract "metaphor" arbitrarily invented by humans and accepted by common agreement to facilitate communication, human beings "forget" this fact and come to believe that they are "true" and do "correspond to reality."

> What about these conventions of language? Are they really the products of knowledge, of the sense of truth? Do the designations and the things coincide? Is language the adequate expression of all realities? Only through forgetfulness can man ever achieve the illusion of possessing a "truth" in the sense just designated. (*On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, § 1, trans. W.A. Haussmann)

> It is this way with all of us concerning language; we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities. (*On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, § 1, trans. W. A. Haussmann)

Worse: humans believe that these imaginary entities really exist as Ideas or Forms, whose real objects or events are only degraded copies. Language makes us Platonic without knowing it. This is already true for simple things like leaves.

> No leaf ever wholly equals another, and the concept "leaf" is formed through an arbitrary abstraction from these individual differences, through forgetting the distinctions; and now it gives rise to the idea that in nature there might be something besides the leaves which would be "leaf"—some kind of original form after which all leaves have been woven, marked, copied, colored, curled, and painted, but by unskilled hands, so that no copy turned out to be a correct, reliable, and faithful image of the original form. (*On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, § 1, trans. W.A. Haussmann)

But this deceitful effect is particularly powerful in the case of moral notions like "honesty" that we finally considers as existing *per se*.

> We call a person "honest." Why did he act so honestly today? we ask. Our answer usually sounds like this: because of his honesty. Honesty! That is to say again: the leaf is the cause of the leaves. After all, we know nothing of an essence-like quality named "honesty"; we know only numerous individualized, and thus unequal actions, which we equate by omitting the unequal and by then calling them honest actions. In the end, we distill from them a *qualitas occulta [hidden quality]* with the name of "honesty." (*On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, § 1, trans. W.A. Haussmann)

Then comes the famous definition of truth as "mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms."

> What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. (*On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, § 1, trans. W.A. Haussmann)

Science, because it entirely relies on language, is only an anthropomorphic projection on the universe, a deceitful yet useful ordering of an ever flowing and chaotic nature.

> Similar to the way in which astrologers considered the stars to be in man's service and connected with his happiness and sorrow, such an investigator considers the entire universe in connection with man: the entire universe as the infinitely fractured echo of one original sound-man; the entire universe as the infinitely multiplied copy of one original picture-man. His method is to treat man as the measure of all things, but in doing so he again proceeds from the error of believing that he has these things [which he intends to measure] immediately before him as mere objects. He forgets that the original perceptual metaphors are metaphors and takes them to be the things themselves. (*On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, § 1, trans. W.A. Haussmann)

The main benefit of this linguistic self-deception concerns the human experience. By "petrifying" or

"coagulating" our "stream" of sensations and images, the language introduces "stability," "consistency" and therefore a bit of "security" into human experience, which otherwise would be entirely subjected to the passing of time, dispersion and loss.

> Only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor can one live with any repose, security, and consistency: only by means of the petrification and coagulation of a mass of images which originally streamed from the primal faculty of human imagination like a fiery liquid, only in the invincible faith that *this* sun, *this* window, this table is a truth in itself, in short, only by forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating* subject, does man live with any repose, security, and consistency. If but for an instant he could escape from the prison walls of this faith, his "self consciousness" would be immediately destroyed. (*On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, § 1, trans. W.A. Haussmann)

In his *Darstellung der antiken Rhetorik* written for the summer semester 1874, Nietzsche expands this view into rhetoric. He declares that tropes are not to be understood only aesthetically as mere ornament, nor semantically as figurative meanings that derive from literal, proper denominations. Rather, tropes and rhetoric illustrate the "truest nature" of language.

> It is not difficult to demonstrate that what is called "rhetorical," as the devices of a conscious art, is present as a device of unconscious art in language and its development. We can go so far as to say that *rhetoric is an extension [Fortbildung] of the devices [Kunstmittel] embedded in language* at the clear light of reason. No such thing as an unrhetorical, "natural" language exists that could be used as a point of reference: language is itself the result of sonorous rhetorical devices *[von lauter rhetorischen Künsten]*. [...] *Language is rhetoric*, for it only intends to convey *dóxa*, not *epistéme* [...] Tropes are not something that can be added or subtracted from language at will; they are its truest nature. There is no such thing as a "proper meaning" that can be communicated only in certain particular cases. (KGA II4, p. 425-427 – quoted by De Man, 1978, p. 105-106 – my brackets)

Nothing seems to change on this subject in later texts. In the 1887 *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche still argues that language—and the "fundamental errors of reason petrified within it"—"construes and misconstrues all actions as conditional upon an agency, a 'subject.'"

> A quantum of force is just such a quantum of drive, will, action, in fact it is nothing but this driving, willing and acting, and only the seduction of language (and the fundamental errors of reason petrified within it), which construes and misconstrues all actions as conditional upon an agency, a "subject," can make it appear otherwise. (*On the Genealogy of Morality*, I, § 13, trans. Carol Diethe)

Because of "the seduction of language," we tend to refer the phenomena to what we consider as real entities being their "cause," their "substratum," their "subject."

> And just as the common people separates lightning from its flash and takes the latter to be a *deed*, something performed by a subject, which is called lightning, popular morality separates strength from the manifestations of strength, as though there were an indifferent substratum behind the strong person which had the *freedom* to manifest strength or not. But there is no such substratum; there is no "being" behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it; "the doer" is invented as an afterthought,—the doing is everything. (*On the Genealogy of Morality*, I, § 13, trans. Carol Diethe)

In his last published text, Nietzsche famously argues that if we cannot get rid of God, it is "because we still have faith in grammar."

> "Reason" in language—oh, what an old deceptive female she is! I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar. (*Twilight of the Idols*, 1888, III, § 5, trans. Thomas Common)

This idea is but an extension to that exposed the year before in *The Genealogy of Morality*. God is the ultimate concept that gather together all minor subjects installed by language; he is the most abstract result of the way language works by reducing the diversity of experiences and creating a humanized i.e. subjectified worldview.

Following Derrida, many postmodernist thinkers have expressed their admiration for these views because they seem to attest that correspondence between language and reality is impossible to establish, due to the mere metaphoric nature or, as De Man put it, "the figurality of all language," and consequently that absolute truth and positive science does not exist (Derrida, 1972a and 1972b; De Man, 1979; Roderick, 1991).

However, this common agreement does not prove these views are correct. 1. As a matter of fact, one may suggest that this rather crude conception, in which language is reduced to names and concepts, arbitrariness considered mere subjective and social convention, and the distrust against it now raised to its climax, are nothing new. All these views have been commonplace in the empiricist tradition since Bacon and can already be found in Hobbes and especially Locke who criticized common substantial as well as moral notions exactly on the same ground (*Essay on Human Understanding*, III, 1690 – see Michon, 2015a, p. 359-369). Hence Nietzsche does nothing but radicalize the age-old empiricist mistrust towards language and bring it to the self-defeating point where, unlike classical empiricism, it turns against science and truth themselves. Nietzsche and his poststructuralist or postmodern followers bump here into what some modern serious thinkers have accurately called a "performative contradiction" and others, who prefer lighter wit, mocked by noticing that it is difficult to talk hours or write long books and hope to demonstrate that language cannot say anything true.

2. It is no chance that Nietzsche retrieves the very famous example of the leaf proposed by Leibniz to illustrate the principle of identity of indiscernibles. The concept of individuality that accompanies this view of language is akin to his metaphysics and has the same limits.

3. The idea that man "himself is an *artistically creating* subject" is a very problematic radicalization of various themes already developed in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. It pursues the critique of dogmatism initiated in the *Critique of Pure Reason* by referring human reason not only to its subjective built-in limitations, but also to the propelling power of imagination and particularly to the deceptive power of language itself.

4. If we now look further back, we realize that the concept of convention and the mistrust it generates grow their deeper roots in Aristotle and Plato: both notions presuppose that "the genesis of language"—actually reduced to naming—should be defined according to its relation to the "thing-in-itself" or, as Nietzsche finally declares, the "essence," i.e. *from the being*—and not the other way around. In other words, although it presents itself as a radical anti-idealist critique of our myths and illusions based on pure experience, in short as a critique of our naive Platonism, it ironically maintains a strictly Platonic and metaphysical definition of language giving the primacy to the Being.

> So the mysterious X of the thing-in-itself first appears as a nerve stimulus, then as an image, and finally as a sound. Thus the genesis of language does not proceed logically in any case, and all the material within and with which the man of truth, the scientist, and the philosopher later work and build, if not derived from never-never land, is a least not derived from the essence of things. (*On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, § 1, trans. W.A. Haussmann)