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Deconstruction as Critique of Ideology: Paul de Man's Reading of The Critique of Judgment

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RESUMEN

En este artículo se lleva a cabo una reconstrucción de la deconstrucción que realiza Paul de Man de la célebre distinción kantiana entre la filosofía trascendental y la metafísica, tal y como ésta es expuesta en la *Crítica del Juicio*. En lugar de considerar que pertenecen a dos esferas separadas, en el artículo se muestra cómo, según de Man, se da una transición entre ellas que sólo se puede explicar bajo la forma de un cortocircuito tropológico o lingüístico que Kant mismo realiza, pero de manera inconsciente. También se pone de relieve que la noción kantiana de lo sublime, escondida bajo la categoría de lo estético, cumple la función ideológica de reprimir la constitución inherentemente lingüística de todo conocimiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE
CRÍTICA, DECONSTRUCCIÓN, ESTÉTICA, IDEOLOGÍA

ABSTRACT

This article carefully reconstructs Paul de Man's deconstruction of Kant's distinction between transcendental philosophy and metaphysics, as the latter appears in *The Critique of Judgment*. Instead of posing these two as belonging to two separate spheres, the paper shows how, according to de Man, there is a transition between them that can only be accounted for in terms of a tropological or linguistic trick that Kant himself realizes, yet unaware of it. The paper also discusses that Kant's notion of the sublime has an ideological function disguised under the category of the aesthetic, and which amounts to a denial of the inherently linguistic constitution of all knowledge.

KEY WORDS
CRITIQUE, DECONSTRUCTION, AESTHETICS, IDEOLOGY

I. DECONSTRUCTION AS CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY

IN THE ARTICLE «PHENOMENALITY and Materiality in Kant», de Man distinguishes, following Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, between transcendental and metaphysical philosophy¹. He wants to reformulate this distinction, not in terms of a stable separation like the one put forward by Kant, but instead in terms of a relationship between critique and ideology. I would like to argue in this paper that it is precisely this relationship that grounds Paul de Man's project of deconstruction. As it is well known, In Kant's view, metaphysical philosophy asserts that partial knowledge is possible as a consequence of the so-called empirical data provided by sensual, empirical, natural, worldly or real sources (metaphysical principles) existing outside conceptual knowledge. Although metaphysical knowledge is cognitively necessary, however, it is not in itself sufficient. If the knowledge that is provided by metaphysical principles is to be valid, that is, if it is not to remain as simple non-processed data, something else is required which can only be provided by a transcendental viewpoint. Transcendental philosophy ensures that knowledge remains within the confines of concepts (transcendental principles) and it brings to light the conditions that make the sources of metaphysical knowledge perceptible in the first place. If metaphysics can claim that there are bodies, for instance, this is because transcendental knowledge furnishes the category of substance; or, if metaphysics can contend that bodies or things move and change, this can only be validly ascertained because there are transcendental categories of relation.

Now, we can reformulate Kant's distinction between transcendental and metaphysical principles in linguistic terms so that the former can be seen to constitute (transcendental) knowledge that is mediated by language and the latter can be seen to constitute (metaphysical) knowledge that is supposed to be given by empirical or extra-linguistic sources. The argument of Kant's critique is that no valid knowledge can be provided by extra-linguistic sources, that is, that only what which is or can be conceptualized can be known at all; language is the condition of possibility of knowledge. Metaphysics consists of the belief that extra-linguistic data can directly or immediately provide knowledge; or, in de Man's words, it rests upon a «confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism» (1990, p. 23) Metaphysics affirms that the things that we talk about can be known independently of the concepts that we use to name them, that is, as given facts or natural objects (metaphysical principles).

1 Paul de Man, «Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant» (1996b, pp. 70-90); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Introduction, section V: «The Principle of the Formal Purposiveness of Nature Is a Transcendental Principle of Judgment», Indianapolis, Cambridge, Hackett, 1987, pp. 20-26.

In contradistinction to metaphysics, then, valid knowledge is always, for Kant, mediated through categories or transcendental principles. In themselves, however, these categories are empty, they contain no information: they are the condition of possibility of facts or objects being perceived at all. It follows from this that even if metaphysical principles cannot constitute knowledge by themselves, they are the content that fills out transcendental principles. In Kant's distinction, then, transcendental philosophy knows nothing about the world; its task is simply to criticize metaphysical philosophy. The question that immediately arises here is the following: how can we actually know something about the world and, at the same time, guarantee that this knowledge is valid? Valid knowledge, Kant replies, is to be conceived as a process through which the information provided by metaphysics is criticized by transcendental philosophy. Knowledge *proceeds* as a transcendental critique of metaphysical philosophy.

If we carefully examine Kant's argument, de Man claims, the distinction between metaphysical and transcendental philosophy reveals itself to be not as strict as it is supposed to be. For if valid knowledge proceeds as a transcendental critique of metaphysical philosophy, then transcendental principles require metaphysical principles in order even to be formed, just as metaphysical principles require transcendental principles in order to be valid. Transcendental knowledge is, in itself, empty; and metaphysics is, in itself, blind. In de Man's view, Kant's argument necessarily leads to the conclusion that there is a relationship between metaphysics and transcendental philosophy. These two distinct yet interdependent instances of knowledge can, he continues, be re-denominated: metaphysics can be called ideology and transcendental philosophy can be called critique or critical philosophy. Knowledge is conceived as a process of critique that cannot collapse the difference between these two moments: «The possibility of maintaining the causal link between them [critique and ideology] is the controlling principle of rigorous philosophical discourse: philosophies that succumb to ideology lose their epistemological sense, whereas philosophies that try to by-pass or repress ideology lose all critical thrust and risk being repossessed by what they foreclose» (1996b, p. 72).

This difference and interdependence between critique and ideology becomes clearer if we introduce a slight change of terminology. Ideology claims that certain extra-linguistic facts or real objects in the world are the cause of our beliefs, that is, that they have a normative impact upon our knowledge. On some occasions this fact in the world is considered as stable —as a fixed entity, for instance— and on others it is conceived as undergoing change —as a natural process, for instance. In both cases, it is ideological to think that the entity or process in the world has a normative impact upon the beliefs that we hold. The importance of Kant's argument resides in the following realization: we can

only avoid ideology when we take everything that we know to be conceptually mediated or interpreted. Extra-linguistic facts or objects can only become part of what we know when they are linguistically conceived. Just as importantly, however, Kant's reasoning also shows that—even if we can only know things when they are conceptually mediated—language does not itself constitute the world. Language always and necessarily refers to something, talks about something, even if the awareness of this something is always already linguistically mediated. We lapse into linguistic idealism, then, when we ignore that language *refers to* something; and we lapse into ideology when we think that this something exists in a realm wholly external to language. The referential function of language, the difference between the words that we use and the things that are named by them, is internal to language itself. The claims of Kant and de Man about the necessary conceptuality of knowledge and their concomitant critiques of metaphysics and ideology—as phenomena that deny or ignore this conceptual mediation—are coterminous, to give another example that could illustrate this point, with those of a philosopher in the analytic tradition: recall here Donald Davidson's famous criticisms of the concept of empirical content. Similarly, the idea of the internal division of language as a fracture or relationship of difference between words and things is coterminous with Davidson's claim that the difference between word and world is internal to language itself².

Now, we could also reformulate this difference between the words that we use and the things that they name in terms of a tension between semiotics and semantics. The semiotic dimension of language entails that we presuppose words in order to speak about things; its semantic dimension entails that we always refer to something when we speak. Ideology can be conceived, then, as the attempt to eliminate the difference and relationship between the semiotic and semantic dimensions of language, dimensions intrinsic to knowledge and communication. When ideology takes things or facts to be given in a realm outside language, it forgets that any thing or fact, in order to be known at all, has first to be named by language. Ideology forgets or represses the fact that we have to presuppose concepts in order to name things and that this naming by concepts necessarily refers to something.

It is in this light that de Man's appropriation of Kant's distinction between transcendental philosophy and metaphysics can be clarified. Kant's distinction between transcendental principles and metaphysical principles—once it is seen to entail a relationship of interdependence, and not a strict separation—can be

2 Donald Davidson, «On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme», in *Inquiries into Truth & Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 183-198; and especially: «Empirical Content», in *Truth and Interpretation. Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. by Ernest Lepore, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 320-332.

transposed into that between semiotics and semantics. Transcendental principles are the categories through which we know things. Because they always depend upon metaphysical principles, however, they can be construed as the concepts that we presuppose when we refer to things (semiotics). Metaphysical principles tell us about the world in a non-reliable way. Because these principles are always related to the transcendental categories, however, they can be construed as the things that we talk about or refer to by means of language (semantics)³.

II. AESTHETIC IDEOLOGY

We have seen that Kant's distinction between transcendental principles and metaphysical principles cannot be maintained on the basis of his own conception of valid knowledge; it has, instead, to be construed in terms of a relationship of interdependence. Kant himself, however, always retained this distinction. The *Critique of Judgment* can be interpreted as Kant's attempt to explain the interrelation between transcendental philosophy and metaphysics. I want to briefly concentrate now on de Man's analysis of the mode in which Kant accounts in this text for the transition between metaphysics and transcendental philosophy. According to de Man, Kant attempts to conceive of an exchange between metaphysics and transcendental philosophy —despite their initially strict separation— by means of an unconscious use of figurative discourse. It is only by means of tropes, the movements of which can be traced in Kant's texts, that ideology and critique —metaphysics and transcendental philosophy— can be seen to effectively interact. The tropological movements of Kant's texts also reveal that we always require concepts in order to talk about something, that is, that, even when ideology denies it, the use of language to refer to the world is inescapable. It is this realization that leads de Man to formulate the following two arguments. Firstly, there is in language an intrinsic ideological moment that cannot be done away with. We need to refer to something and this need constitutes a moment of the denial or forgetfulness of language. Secondly, the movement from this ideological moment of reference to the moment of a reflection upon the social use of language —the movement of the critique of ideology— implies an awareness of the language's tropological movement.

Given that Kant presupposes a strict separation between metaphysics and transcendental philosophy, how can he explain the movement, process or

3 De Man does not use this terminology. His equivalent for semiotics is what he calls «grammar»: «The system of relationship generated by the text and that functions independently of its referential meaning is grammatical. Insofar as a text is grammatical, it is a logical code or a machine» (1990, p. 306). Semantics is conceived as referential meaning.

relationship between them? The strict separation between transcendental philosophy and metaphysics means, for Kant, that there can in no circumstances be a mutual interchange between them, it means that they have a different ontological status: transcendental principles are linguistic; metaphysical principles are extra-linguistic. How, then, is the transformation from empirical data to critical and conceptual knowledge possible? What is it that allows empirical or metaphysical principles to be comprehended as valid? Kant can obviously not reply to this question by claiming that the movement is carried out by metaphysical knowledge itself, for this would be to imply a pre-critical step, one that could never guarantee the validity of such a process. He is therefore forced to maintain that the cognitive movement, since it cannot be metaphysical, simply *resembles* the movement of bodies. It is this comparison that determines Kant's argument. The movement or transformation from metaphysics to transcendental knowledge has, on the one hand, to be transcendental, it has to be generated by the conceptual apparatus or system and, on the other hand, it has to be a movement similar to the metaphysical movement of bodies. The problem is to determine the categories that can be understood as the condition of possibility of this movement of the transcendental critique of metaphysics. De Man proposes the following interpretation of the problem and its supposed solution:

If critical philosophy and metaphysics (...) are causally linked to each other, their relationship is similar to the relationship (...) between bodies and their transformation or motions. Critical philosophy and ideology [or transcendental philosophy and metaphysics (S.A.)] then become each other's motion: if an ideology is considered to be a stable entity (body, corpus, or canon), the critical discourse it generates will be that of a transcendental motion, of a motion whose cause resides, so to speak, within itself, within the substance of its own being. And if the critical system is considered stable in its principles, the corresponding ideology will acquire a mobility caused by a principle that lies outside itself; this principle, within the confines of the system thus constituted, can only be the principle of constitution, the architectonics of the transcendental system that functions as the cause of the ideological motions. In both cases, it is the transcendental system, as substance or as structure, that determines the ideology and not the reverse. (1996b p. 72)

In order to account for the cognitive process of the transcendental critique of metaphysics, Kant refers, on the one hand, to the metaphysical or empirical fact that objects move and, on the other hand, to the transcendental or linguistic categories of substance and relation. But if metaphysical principles and transcendental principles interact with one another and, at the same time, remain strictly distinct, how can Kant comprehend the process of transformation as a transcendental one? Let us recall here that this process is supposed to resemble

the movement of bodies. This comparison follows from the original distinction between metaphysics and transcendental philosophy. Kant presupposes that, because these two instances of knowledge are strictly distinct, the movement *between* them has to be «external» to their own constitution. If the metaphysical and transcendental principles remained stable then the critical movement could not be said to occur at all; and, if Kant did not presuppose the original distinction, then this movement would have to be construed as a constant occurrence. Moreover, because the metaphysical and transcendental principles are distinct, it also follows that they are limited, that is, that they can be said to form two different sets of systems.

We can therefore infer from Kant's original dichotomy —from the fact transcendental and metaphysical principles cannot move and, *at the same time*, be stable, and from the fact that they form separate and finite sets or systems—the following two possible accounts of the transcendental critique of metaphysics. Firstly, the system of metaphysical principles or extra-linguistic facts can be conceived as stable (as a body) and the system of transcendental principles as moving (as a relation). On this account, the condition of possibility of the cognitive movement would be the substance of the system of transcendental principles itself, that is, the very substance of the transcendental system would be conceived as movement. Secondly, the system of metaphysical principles or extra-linguistic facts can be conceived as moving (as change) and the system of transcendental principles or concepts as stable (as substance). On this account, the cognitive movement cannot be accounted for by the movement of the transcendental principles themselves, for, as we have already seen, this would imply a pre-critical or metaphysical step. The condition of possibility of this movement can only be construed as a consequence of the constitution of the system of transcendental principles, as a consequence of the structure or architectonic of the conceptual apparatus. In both cases, then —either when the system of metaphysical principles is conceived as moving and the system of transcendental principles as stable, or vice versa— it is the system of transcendental principles, that is, the substance or structure of language, that proves to be the condition of possibility of the transcendental critique of metaphysics. The logic of Kant's argument leads to the following unavowed thesis: it is only because language has a substance or structure that the critical knowledge of ideology can proceed.

Kant is forced to claim, then, that it is the very movable substance or structure of language that generates the critical transition from metaphysics to transcendental philosophy. It is important to emphasize here that Kant does not explicitly make this claim. His philosophical project, which proceeds, as we have just seen, from the overcoming of an original separation, needs to be presented in such a way that this separation is concealed. In his article on Kant, de Man

therefore wants to show that Kant's implicit claims about the nature of language (as a substance or structure) are the result of this original strict separation. Once again, Kant does not explicitly defend, he defends them implicitly as a consequence of his own unconscious reliance upon figurative language. As de Man puts it, following Walter Benjamin, these claims form part of Kant's «way of saying (*Art des Sagens*) as opposed to what is being said (*das Gesagte*)» (1996b p. 89). Kant never openly declares, that is, that language has a substance or a structure, nor does he realize that he is using figurative language to account for the relation and distinction between metaphysics and critique.

I want to briefly summarize now the main steps in de Man's deconstruction of Kant. What is it, he asks, that allows Kant to think of language as a substance or structure? In attempting to answer this question, de Man concentrates, firstly, on Kant's notion of the sublime⁴ —the status of this notion within the *Critique of Judgement* is that of a transcendental medium that ensures the transition between metaphysics and transcendental philosophy. De Man wants to show that the supposedly transcendental operations of the sublime are in fact rhetorical mechanisms. The sublime is, Kant contends, a transcendental principle, that is, it is not a property of nature (a metaphysical principle), but instead «an inward experience of consciousness (*Gemütsbestimmung*)», (1996 b p. 74) albeit one that needs to be phenomenally represented. It can also be divided, he claims, into the dynamic sublime and the mathematical sublime⁵. The main characteristic of the sublime is that it is «borderless (*unbegrenzt*) yet a totality» (1996b, p. 75), that is, it is an infinite quantity that can nevertheless be empirically intuited. In de Man's view, a meticulous examination of the two acts of the imagination that account for the description of the sublime, that is, in Kant's terminology, of «apprehension» (*Auffassung*) and «comprehension» (*Zusammenfassung*), demonstrates that they in fact represent two uses of language: syntagmatic successions of and paradigmatic substitutions between different linguistic elements.

What Kant conceives as two purely epistemological or transcendental operations are in fact, de Man claims, two linguistic manoeuvres: «apprehension» (*Auffassung*) is the syntagmatic setting of meanings in sequence within senten-

4 The notion of the beautiful articulates the relationship between understanding («*Verstand*») and judgment; the notion of the sublime articulates the relationship between reason («*Vernunft*») and judgment. The possibility of a critical philosophy rests only in the formulation of the concept of the sublime.

5 The mathematical sublime concerns size or magnitude, the dynamical sublime concerns power or might. We will immediately see that the former corresponds to language as a non-limited totality and the latter to language as a moving substance. *Critique of Judgement*, § 25-28, pp. 103-123.

ces (as, for instance, when we add a predicate to a subject); «comprehension» (*Zusammenfassung*) is the paradigmatic substitution of meanings for other equivalent meanings (as in metaphor). These two linguistic (and epistemological) manoeuvres are interdependent and occur whenever we think and speak: when we add new information we do it syntagmatically; when we relate meanings to other meanings as if the former were part of the latter we do it paradigmatically. It is the interaction between these two functions, moreover, that allows Kant to conceive language as a limitless totality or moving substance: paradigmatic substitutions embrace meanings as if they were part of other meanings (wholes), and these other meanings can always come to form part of other new wholes. Language expands by incorporating meanings that include other meanings; or it contracts when inclusive or comprehensive meanings are contradicted by new information that is syntagmatically added. As de Man concludes, «The desired articulation of the sublime takes place (...) within such a purely formal system [discourse as a tropological system]. It follows, however, that it is conceivable only within the limits of such a system, that is, as pure discourse rather than as a faculty of the mind. (...) The sublime cannot be grounded as a philosophical (transcendental or metaphysical) principle, but only as a linguistic principle.» (1996b, p. 78) De Man's sustained interrogation of Kant's argument reveals, then, its two unavowed presuppositions: firstly, that the sublime —as the intermediary between transcendental philosophy and metaphysics— is not a faculty of the mind, but language conceived under the aspect of a limitless totality or moving substance; and, secondly, that the supposedly transcendental operations of the sublime are in fact linguistic (tropological and metaphorical) substitutions.

Secondly, de Man shows that Kant's account of the transition from metaphysics to transcendental philosophy resorts to tropes when it attempts to provide a reason for the performative effects (affects, moods or feelings) that the sublime produces. In order for the sublime to generate the feeling of tranquil admiration or superiority, Kant maintains, we have to perceive the world «as poets do (*wie die Dichter es tun*)» (1996b, p. 80), that is, as an architectonic construct: «The heavens are a vault that covers the totality of earthy space as a roof covers a house.» (1996b, p. 81). The perception of the world as an architectonic structure is, for Kant, an a priori transcendental principle. De Man therefore inquires what it is that allows Kant to draw this parallel with architectonics.

In Kant's line of reasoning, de Man claims, there are two distinct yet complementary accounts of the architectonic vision of nature: a figurative account and an allegorical one. I want to focus here on the first figurative account. According to de Man, Kant's first account employs the metaphor of the organic and structured unity or of the «totality of various limbs and parts» (1996b, p. 88). This metaphor invests the aesthetic faculty with the capacity to conceive

language as a whole that encompasses different and contradictory significations. These significations are those of «nature and reason, the imagination and nature, tranquillity and shock, adequacy and inadequacy, that separate, fight, and then unite in a more or less stable state of harmony, achieving synthesis and totalizations» (1996b, p. 87). Kant is here substituting the process that he first wanted to account for, de Man claims —the process of the transition from metaphysics to transcendental philosophy— with a metaphor that supposedly includes its two moments in a harmonious relationship. It is this substitution of the concept of the sublime with a conciliatory metaphor, de Man concludes, that constitutes aesthetic ideology. *Aesthetic ideology is an unconscious use of figurative discourse that closes language off from its own inherent capacity for transformation.* To close language off in this way implies two interrelated things. Firstly, it implies that language is conceived not as contingent and variable set of meanings, but as a stable system (such a conception necessarily follows, as we have seen, from Kant's strict separation between transcendental and metaphysical principles). In order to conceive language as a stable system, Kant takes recourse to the metaphor of an all-inclusive totality or substance and of an organic and total structure. Secondly, this closing off implies an abolishing of the difference between critique and ideology. By unconsciously setting up a meaning (a substance or structure) that is supposed to account for the transition between metaphysical and transcendental principles, and by implicitly presupposing that this all-encompassing meaning can harmoniously and unproblematically embrace both sets of principles, Kant conceals, and effectively does away with, that constitutive difference from which he originally departed —a difference which lies at the basis of the possibility of critique.

To briefly recapitulate, then, knowledge is seen to consist, for Kant, in the process of a critique of ideology. Knowledge emerges as a critique of that which is mistakenly presupposed as given. Kant thus makes a distinction between metaphysical principles (which conceive their referent as a natural object) and transcendental principles (which provide the concepts, the conditions of possibility, for the perception of metaphysical principles). The transcendental critique of metaphysics establishes that knowledge depends upon both metaphysical principles and the transcendental principles that allow them to be known or grasped. In linguistic terms, Kant correctly demonstrates that knowledge is always and necessarily linguistic; and that metaphysical knowledge or ideology, in assuming that things or facts are given outside language, is mistaken. Kant wrongly assumes, however, that transcendental and metaphysical principles belong to two wholly distinct sets that can never exchange positions. If Kant had perceived that transcendental and metaphysical principles depend upon one another whilst, at the same time, remaining distinct, he might have inferred the possibility of an interchanging of roles between them. He might have noticed that they are not

limited systems, but meanings that are contingently adopted in one of two modes: referential (metaphysical) and presuppositional (transcendental). What Kant did not perceive, that is, is that he was unknowingly talking about language; he did not perceive that his two supposedly distinct sets of principles were in fact the two interrelated functions of language: semantics and semiotics.

Kant did not know, then, that he was writing and thinking about language. De Man denominates this unawareness as a resistance to theory: «The resistance to theory is a resistance to the use of language about language» (1990, p. 25); and, concomitantly, it is «a resistance to the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language» (1990, p. 32) I want now to show how a reflection upon language—which is always a struggle against this resistance—reveals the exchange between semantics and semiotics, an exchange that Kant could ignore but not completely do away with. It is this reflection upon language—including figurative language—that lies, I want to argue, at the basis of the critique of ideology. De Man denominates as «blind» that use of language that mistakenly and unconsciously understands the referential function as a real entity. Blindness is coterminous, that is, with ideology. In contradistinction to this blind or ideological use, the use of language is «insightful» when it operates according to the «unstated principle that leads his [the critic's or the philosopher's] language away from its asserted stand, perverting and dissolving his stated commitment to the point where it becomes emptied of substance, as if the very possibility of assertion has been put into question.» (1971, p. 103) Kant's blindness, de Man is arguing—if we transpose his claim into the context of our discussion—could not completely do away with language: it is Kant's own unconscious use of figurative language, his blind or ideological claim that something is natural or real, that opens up the space for de Man's critical insight. Or, as de Man puts it in *Allegories of Reading*: «Deconstruction is not something added to the text, it is itself constituted in the text» (1990, p. 31). De Man's article on the *Critique of Judgment* shows that, on the one hand, Kant blindly maintains that there is a rigid separation between ideology and critique and, on the other hand, insightfully demonstrates that there is a relationship of exchange between them. This insight is worked out by language itself, by de Man's translation of Kant's blindness into insight. De Man reads the *Critique of Judgment* and discovers what the text itself says in opposition to Kant's own resistance. For even if Kant wants to separate out semantics and semiotics, the fact is that they must always interact in every act of communication. De Man's original claim is, then, the following: Kant's insight into the necessary exchange between semantics and semiotics is made possible by a blind and unconscious recourse to figurative language.

Figurative language can be said to possess, then, two important and interrelated functions (it can be said to say two things): it insightfully asserts and,

at the same time, blindly denies the linguistic constitution of knowledge. To deny the linguistic knowledge nature of knowledge is to take figurative language literally. De Man shows, for instance, that Kant employs the metaphors of building and organic unity in his discussions of aesthetic judgement. If we do not realize that Kant is using figurative language, then we univocally think that aesthetic judgement can be represented (literally, ideologically or blindly) as an organic unity. Furthermore, de Man claims, when a metaphor is used blindly it usually employs a totalizing meaning. It is as a consequence of this that metaphor establishes within the text relationships of inclusion and exclusion: «It is absurd to ask whether a code is true or false, but impossible to bracket this question when tropes are involved —and this always seems to be the case. Whenever the question is repressed, tropological patterns reenter the system in the guise of such formal categories as polarity (...) They are always again totalizing systems that try to ignore the disfiguring power of figuration» (1996, p. 49). Kant employs the metaphors of building and structure to account for the concept of the sublime, a concept that is supposed to facilitate the exchange between metaphysical and transcendental principles. It follows that whereas transcendental principles —conceived as part of language— remain within the structure or building, metaphysical principles —conceived as external to language— are left outside. The polarity between the metaphysical and transcendental principles, and the epistemological priority that is accorded to the latter, is the consequence of Kant's unconscious use of metaphor.

The second function of figurative language is critical, it demands an awareness of language itself. In understanding aesthetic judgement as an organic unity, we can explicitly realize that Kant is using a metaphor. This step is critical because instead of repressing figurative language it asks about its truth or falsity. To show that the idea of organic unity is metaphorical means to be aware that language has been used to convey a meaning different to the usual one. The usual meaning applies to physical bodies, the new metaphorical meaning applies to aesthetic judgement.

The insightful awareness of figurative language (critique) can be said to carry out, then, two interrelated tasks. Firstly, it displays the two components of this language. Whereas ideology claims that only one meaning is in play or, rather, a natural or real fact that is supposed to exert normative impact upon knowledge («The figure des-figures, that is, it makes fear [de Man here alludes to Rousseau's reference to a so-called «real» fact] which, in itself, is a para-figured fiction, into an inescapable reality (...) Metaphor presupposes a world in which we could distinguish between intra and extra-linguistic events, between literal and figurative forms of language; a world in which the figurative and the literal are properties that can be isolated. (...) This is a mistake, although we can say that no language could be possible without it» (1990, p. 176-7)),

critique draws attention to the two interrelated meanings (the usual and the metaphorical) that are necessarily at work in figurative language. Secondly, the insightful awareness of figurative language inverts these two meanings. Whereas ideology takes the meaning literally and conceives it as a real fact, critique takes it metaphorically and shows that it can also be read literally. That which is literal for ideology becomes metaphorical for critique. In displaying this inversion of meanings, critique can be comprehended as an awareness of the constant exchange between the two essential functions of language (semantics and semiotics).

What remains, however, of literalness for the critical or insightful gaze? Is figurative language all there is? On the basis of what has been argued above, this is clearly not the case. In the first place, we need to take things literally or ideologically in order even to understand what we are talking about. As de Man puts it: «To understand means primarily to determine the referential mode of a text, and we have to assume that this is possible» (1990, p. 231). In the second place, we also need to figure out whether what we are talking about is actually meant literally or, as de Man claims: «Every reading implies an election between signification and symbolization, and this choice can only be done if we presuppose the possibility of distinguishing between the literal and the figurative.» (*ibid.*) If Kant and de Man read the sentence «aesthetic judgment is an organic unity,» they will both understand the words that form it. But, whereas Kant will inadvertently take the usual literal meaning of the words to be the same as that which he intends them to mean, that is, will not notice that he has used a metaphor, de Man will see a difference between these two things, between the usual (semiotic) meaning and the intended (semantic) one. De Man acknowledges, that is, an inversion or exchange between semantics and semiotics that remains invisible to Kant. Or, in the terminology of the chapter 1, whereas Kant holds on to a mistakenly strict conception of literal meaning, de Man correctly conceives this literalness as a function of language, one that always be inverted by its figurative use.

The strict conception of literalness is mistaken because it assumes a stable and static relationship between word and meaning, between word and world. It forgets, that is, that the tie between meaning and signification is radically contingent. (1996b, p. 93, p. 96) The strict conception of literal meaning also assumes that these meanings are organized into a totality and, hence, that language forms a closed system of meanings that univocally correspond to words. By contrast, the conception of literalness as a function of language draws attention to the presupposed reference of a literal utterance and the presupposed (literal) meaning of a figurative one. Literalness can only be ascertained within language, that is, contextually; it is constantly set in motion by the blind use of figurative language. As de Man insightfully puts it: «We have no way of

defining, or policing, the boundaries that separate the name of one entity from the name of another; tropes are not just travelers, they tend to be smugglers and probably smugglers of stolen goods at that. What makes matters even worse is that there is no way of finding out whether they do so with criminal intent or not.» (1996b, p. 39) And similarly: «Entities, in themselves, are neither distinct nor defined; no one could say where one entity ends and where another begins» (1996b, p. 44).

Ideology forgets that reference is a fluctuating and unstable function of language and takes it as a real entity or fact in the world. According to de Man, however, ideology cannot be simply eliminated from language. Ideology is a necessary moment of language that can only be criticized by means of an awareness of language itself. Or, as Andrzej Warminski, the editor of de Man's *Aesthetic Ideology*, claims, reiterating a thesis of Althusser: «we are never so much 'in' ideology as when we think ourselves to be 'outside' it»⁶. For both Kant and de Man, however, and for anybody who deals with language, things are named by concepts and can only be known through them, whether this is acknowledged or not. To constantly forget this (as a consequence of the referential function of language) is to constantly assume an unphilosophical or ideological standpoint; and to reflectively overcome this forgetting, again and again, is to engage in critique.

The exchange between semantics and semiotics goes on, then, *ad infinitum*, and ideology keeps forgetting about it. Deconstruction takes the awareness of this exchange between semantics and semiotics as the primary task of knowledge, that is, it incessantly questions meanings that are supposed to be strictly literal (that are supposed to correspond to extra-linguistic facts and real entities) by drawing attention to their dependence upon intra-linguistic and, hence, figurative references and movements. We can respond to the claim «the body is an organic unity», for example, by inquiring whether it is to be taken literally or figuratively. To ask this question is to ask whether this statement is ideological or not, that is, whether it is assumed as a fact of nature or as something conceptually mediated. As soon as something is literally meant, that is, a figurative movement will always and necessarily follow from it. We can interpret deconstruction as a form of reading that never ceases with this kind of questioning: it assumes, on the one hand, an ideological moment in everything that is said and, on the other hand, it maintains itself in a middle ground in order to reveal the constant figurative movement of language⁷. Deconstruction

6 Louis Althusser, «Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses», in *Lenin and Philosophy*, London, New Left Books, 1971, pp. 127-86. (AI, p. 10)

7 This explains why deconstruction, especially in Derrida's version, almost exclusively searches for the ideological or metaphysical moment of whatever is said or written. The question

locates itself, that is, in a middle ground between the two functions of figurative discourse. It is for this reason that deconstruction primarily asserts undecidability, that is, always asks «is this literal or figurative?» It demands a reading that decides upon this question —but one that can in turn become subject to the same kind of questioning.

III. CONCLUSION

De Man's analysis of Kant's conception of the sublime reveals that the latter's text contains a use of figurative language unaware of its own status. He calls this kind of use of language aesthetic ideology, that is, an ideological function disguised under the category of the aesthetic (the faculty that is supposed to account for the transition between metaphysical and transcendental principles). There are infinite ways in which ideology can be concealed, and all of them rely upon a moment that is as constitutive of language as communication itself. Ideological claims always confuse the referential function of language with an extra-linguistic reality. An ideological claim is made when a supposedly real or natural entity is blindly posited as a normative constraint upon knowledge, or when a metaphor is employed that sets itself up as strictly literal. Kant's implicit recourse, with regard to language, to the metaphors of structure and building lays bare that the belief in the normativity of a real or natural given and the use of a concealed metaphor amount to the same thing. We blindly or ideologically posit something as a «given», as a fixed and determined entity or natural process that constrains language from outside; and critical awareness subsequently reveals that such a claim is constituted through figurative language. Kant wanted to account for the transition from metaphysical to transcendental philosophy, that is, for the critique of ideology or for the exchange between semantics and semiotics, and he ultimately did this by means of aesthetic ideology. It was this unconscious lapse into aesthetic ideology that thwarted Kant's articulation of the process from ideology to critique. Because ideology always establishes something as strictly literal, that is, as extra-linguistic, it follows that aesthetic ideology must also deny the inherently linguistic constitution of all knowledge.

to ask deconstruction, then, is why do we necessarily need to presuppose the unavoidability of metaphysics? For a discussion of this problematic in de Man, see *Ästhetik und Rhetorik. Lektüren zu Paul de Man*, ed. by Karl Heinz Bohrer, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993; and Christoph Menke, «“Unglückliches Bewußtsein”», in *Literatur und Kritik bei Paul de Man. Die Ideologie des Ästhetischen*, ed. by Christoph Menke, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 265-299.

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