Nietzsche in Basel: Writing Reading

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Nietzsche in Basel studied the deep pool
Of these discolorations, mastering
The moving and the moving of their forms
In the much-mottled motion of blank time.

Wallace Stevens

Reading and writing and 'rithmetic,
Taught to the tune of a hickory stick.

Truth-content is only to be grasped through immersion
in the most minute details of subject-matter.

Walter Benjamin

In an interview soon to be published in the Journal of Advanced Composition, Gary Olson responded to a claim I made about the close relation between the teaching of reading and the teaching of writing by pointing out that making such a claim might diminish the independent role of programs in composition. I suppose he meant that if everyone assumes students already learn to write in classes in reading, then specialized courses in composition might be unnecessary. This was the attitude of some colleagues of mine at both Johns Hopkins and Yale back in the sixties and early seventies. So I am aware that arguing for a tight bond between reading and writing has important implications for the power structures of departments within universities and colleges. My exploration of this topic is made within that context. I claim, however, that far from weakening the role of programs in composition, my position would greatly strengthen it by recognizing that the teaching of composition is not just an instrumental sideline in higher education. It is not just the teaching of correct grammar, spelling, paragraph structure, and so on that should have been mastered already in high school. On the contrary, learning to write teaches habits of reading that are fundamental in any course or discipline, not to speak of political or social life outside the university. In a democracy, bad readers are in great danger. You might elect the wrong leaders or buy bad merchandise. As you write, so you read. As you read, so you write. Writing is a reflection and testimony to the habits of reading in the writer. A paradigmatic example of that is the way translating something you think you can read perfectly well in the original language shows you places
where you do not understand. The standard way of testing in college classes what you have assimilated from required reading is to ask you to write something about it. Learning to write well is at the same time learning to read well. The two always go inextricably together. Let me explain this further.

**Reading, Writing, and Ideology**

Reading and writing, along with the rudiments of arithmetic, are, or used to be, the first things taught small children in grade school. Speaking is taught in the family, primarily by the mother, hence "mother tongue." If speaking one's mother tongue seems almost "natural"—taken in with mother's milk, so to speak—reading and writing are cultural and social, unnatural. If someone does not teach you, you will never learn to read and write. Though some parents teach their children reading and writing, the school system assumes it starts from scratch. Reading and writing are imposed by the first extra-familial authority the child encounters. The schoolroom is a scene of instruction reinforced by the hickory stick that is the synecdochic representative of all the power of the state. If you do not learn to read and write, you will be beaten. Today, beating of grade school children happens less often, but the imposition of a culture's ideology by teaching reading and writing is no less puissantly enforced in all sorts of ways. These are no less violent for not involving physical punishment. The imposition of this socializing force continues even into required undergraduate courses in writing. It may be that students resist these courses so much because they unconsciously see them as a continuation of those first awful weeks away from mother with Dick, Jane, and the alphabet in the first grade.

What do I mean by "ideology" when I say the teaching of reading and writing from grade school through graduate school is one of the most powerful ways a culture's ideology is imposed? I mean by ideology the confusion of linguistic with natural reality. We are led to think it is natural whereas it is actually linguistic. Louis Althusser, in a celebrated essay, speaks of the way he calls "state apparatuses," including schools, enforce an ideology, defined by him as the imaginary version of our real relations to our fellows and to material reality. These apparatuses do this enforcing by hailing or interpellating someone to be the person the state wants him to be. A police officer says, "Hey You!" and I instinctively respond, "Who, me?" The teaching of both writing and reading is a splendid example of that interpellation: "Hey you! You have split an infinitive and spliced with a comma!" "I'm sorry. I'll never do it again."

Reading and writing are always closely associated in this process of appropriation, accommodation, or socialization, that shapes the illiterate child into a citizen. The two go together from the beginning. The child in the first grade is taught to read in order to be able to write and taught to write in order to be able to read. In one way or another, that goes on being the case even in college courses in composition, even though the student's ability to
"read" in the literal sense may be (falsely) taken for granted in courses in composition. Of course, much teaching of reading goes on in composition courses. What the student is learning in other courses about how to read also affects in important ways how he or she writes. Thus, composition teachers have every reason to be deeply interested in how reading is taught or in what is assumed about reading in other courses or in the culture generally.

What ideology is it that learning to read and write in our culture imposes? And how does such learning instill it in children? It is now widely recognized that grade school textbook readers are not ideologically neutral, though some people of course would still want to claim they are. An interlocked system of assumptions about race, class, gender, and family relations is implied in those little stories about Dick and Jane. That this assertion is controversial is demonstrated by the recent hullabaloo about the inclusion of several grade school readers that presented gay and lesbian families among a multitude of other possibilities from which the teacher might choose. William Bennett in a television talk show vigorously opposed even making it possible to choose to use such a reader. "Grade school teachers," I am told he said, "should just teach reading." But there is no such thing as an ideologically neutral reader. The one showing a gay family is just as ideological as the one presuming the proper family consists of a mother, a father, and two children, a boy who plays with trucks and a girl who plays with dolls.

But however important this ideological reinforcement is, I am less interested here in the thematic content of grade school readers or in the writing exercises the children are given than in the complex system of assumptions presupposed in prescriptions for correct writing and reading that are imposed in our culture from the first grade through graduate school and beyond. Whenever I correct a split infinitive or a run-on sentence in the draft of a graduate student's dissertation chapter, I am continuing the work of policing begun in the first grade. Whenever one of my copyeditors goes through a book manuscript of mine and makes changes in the name of correctness, clarity, or "the house style," that policing continues. In my rewriting of the manuscript of this essay to make it clearer and more correct—for example, by eliminating sequences of "of clauses"—I am showing that such policing, as Foucault predicts, has been internalized. Finally I do not need the composition police at all. That might be the measure of a successful program of instruction in composition. A set of rules and habits in both reading and writing becomes so thoroughly internalized and instinctive that it no longer needs to be externally enforced. Though, of course, what I write is not "literature," it is nevertheless instructive to imagine what would happen to Shakespeare, Faulkner, Joyce, Woolf (or, for that matter, Derrida) if they were "copyedited" in the same way. If they needed to defy standards of correctness in order to say what they wanted to say, that suggests that there may be some things worth saying that cannot be said in a "correct" style.
Just as the thematic content of grade school readers is not neutral, so also the standards of correctness and clarity in writing are not natural or universal. They too are ideological. Their ideological content is all the more powerful for being surreptitious, for being disguised as universal and natural. What system of assumptions is it that all this teaching and correcting imposes? It is just that assemblage of concepts that make up what is called "logocentrism" or "Western metaphysics." It is not for nothing that the first stage of the medieval trivium, the first thing students were taught, was grammar. Medieval grammar, as Gary Olson reminds me, was much wider in scope than our modern notion of grammar as parts of speech and correct usage. Grammar was exegesis as the bringing out of the meaning of a text. Nevertheless, exegesis probably meant then something much closer to a process of correct parsing than anything like modern critical commentary. Grammar, followed by logic and rhetoric, was the foundation on which the whole airy edifice of the quadrivium, the sciences of the external world—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—was built.

Assumptions that go back to the Greeks, especially to Aristotle, underlie the teaching of grammar and composition. Grammar itself, as everyone knows, was a codification by scholars of the practice of Greek and Latin writers. Grammar was an empirical and reductive description of actual practice, in all its heterogeneity, that then became prescriptive. As we say they did, so should you do. This notion was ultimately transferred along with its terminology to vernacular languages, where it fits more or less well, but by no means perfectly. The oddnesses of Milton's language in *Paradise Lost* are a sign of this. Nothing quite like an ablative absolute exists in English. No process could be more artificial, nor more an act of cultural power, than this development of standards of grammatical correctness. (Note the double "of clause.")

Grammar, logic, and rhetoric, the interwoven sequence of the trivium that has now been combined in our single modern discipline of composition, presume definite standards of coherence. A shapely discourse should have a beginning, middle, and end, like a good Aristotelian plot. Everything should hang together. Nothing extraneous should be included. All should be governed by a single idea or ground that might be called the "logos" of the whole discourse. The distinction between literal and figurative language is assumed, along with the priority of the former over the latter. Figurative language is an adornment added through metaphorical transfers to a literal base whose meaning is guaranteed by its referentiality. The literal language of a good composition refers, truthfully, either to the external world or to the subjectivity of the one who composes the discourse. That subjectivity remains as a sovereign, separate, paradigmatically masculine, ego in control of word choices determined by what "he" wants to say. The word "composition" suggests a consciously controlled act of putting together.
Perfect translatability between one language and another is assumed. Those copyeditors I have mentioned show an extreme reluctance to allow the inclusion of citations in a foreign language. What will happen to this present essay will be a test of that. It is assumed that everything can be said and can be said in English. This everything that can be said can always be said clearly, correctly, and coherently, that is, by following the rules of good writing. This is the version within the discipline of composition of that basic principle of the modern university: the principle of sufficient reason. That principle assumes that everything has its “reason.” This reason can and should be given. That is what the university is for, to account for everything.

Suppose a teacher of composition were to want to put this millennial ideology in question, at least to show that it is an ideology, a linguistic fiction not a natural fact? How would he or she go about doing that? The danger is that teachers of composition may assume that the reading chosen for the course can be liberating while the formal instruction in the rules of correct composition remains the same. This does not work. It does not work because the formal aspect of composition is even more powerful in imposing an ideology than is the thematic content of what is read. This is parallel to the way those in women’s studies, minority discourse, or multiculturalism are in danger of falling into the hands of those they challenge if their language repeats in symmetrical mirror image the modes of language of the hegemonic discourse they would contest. Real change will come only through changes that go all the way down to the ground, so to speak, changes in language that challenge all that system of assumptions about language I have described.

I am aware that changes of this sort in the teaching of composition are taking place here and there. Nevertheless, a major frontier for teachers of composition today still remains devising ways to avoid inadvertently reinforcing in teaching rules of correct composition the things they are in the thematic side of their teaching trying to put in question. I am also aware that what I am advocating will seem scandalous to some. These will be those people for whom standards of clarity, unity, and correctness seem universal and natural, not local, ideological, and historically conditioned. Or these may be people who think English, taught in the traditional way, should be a model for the world. To such people the only alternative to this model is anarchy and chaos. They imagine teachers of composition urging their students to write wildly or to persist in “expressing themselves” without regard for any rules. In fact, the alternative ways of writing I am imagining would require as severe a discipline to acquire and master as traditional standards of correctness. This is partly because the traditional standards would also have to be mastered. Those authors I mentioned—Joyce, Derrida, and the rest—conspicuously did that.

I am also aware that it is difficult to conceive just what an alternative way of writing might be like, an anti-logocentric way, a way based on difference and radical heterogeneity rather than on models of sameness and unity. But
many models are already available of what such writing might be like, not only in those authors I have mentioned but, for example, in certain feminist or so-called minority writers active today. The writing I shall now discuss is another example of prose that is stylistically as well as thematically against the grain of the assumptions about good writing we have inherited as a crucial part of our hegemonic culture.

Nietzsche and Rhetoric
My example is Friedrich Nietzsche's early writings on rhetoric. Or rather I take Nietzsche in Basel not so much as an example as a parable or allegory of the connection between reading and writing for which I have been arguing. By "early writings on rhetoric" I mean primarily the lectures on rhetoric, "Darstellung der Antiken Rhetorik," a course delivered in the winter semester (1872-73) at the University of Basle to two students, and the incomplete essay of summer, 1873, "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im Außermoralischen Sinne."4 In these early works, Nietzsche, as Wallace Stevens puts it, "studied the deep pool Of these discolorations ... In the much-mottled motion of blank time"—that is, he studied the colors of rhetoric as they (and our understanding of them) have evolved through Western history.

Why did Nietzsche have only two students and those from the institutes of Germanistic and Jurisprudence? Because in the aftermath of the controversy over The Birth of Tragedy all the students in classical philology were boycotting his course.5 Those who consider acting practically on the suggestions made in this essay should keep Nietzsche's fate in mind. Nietzsche had been appointed an ordinarius professor of classics at Basel in 1869, at the extraordinarily young age of twenty-four. He resigned his post in 1879 for reasons of ill health. Thereafter, he published the series of great works for which he is known. Though Nietzsche is a master of German style, though his works are an admirable exploitation of the resources of the German language, they hardly conform to normal standards of correctness. My hardworked hypothetical copyeditor, agent of the style police, would have had as much trouble with his work as with Joyce, Woolf, or Faulkner. Even The Birth of Tragedy, published in 1872 while Nietzsche was still a professor and prior to the lectures on rhetoric, is more a parody of an academic treatise than a solemn fulfillment of its requirements.

Why did Nietzsche write the way he did? The early works on rhetoric may suggest an answer. They may also hint at a deeper reason why Nietzsche left the university. How could he fulfill the terms of his contract to teach and write in a certain way and at the same time say what he wanted to say, or what he found himself saying? On the one hand, the lectures on ancient rhetoric follow the norms of an academic course. On the other hand, when they are read carefully, with that attention to minute detail for which Benjamin calls, they turn out to be strangely complex and heterogeneous.
These early works are inhabited by a contradiction. As scholars have shown, Nietzsche borrowed freely for his account of ancient rhetoric from books by Friedrich Blass, Gustav Gerber, and Richard Volkmann. The contradiction is present in these sources. On the one hand, the lectures on rhetoric present a traditional and derivative typology of tropes. Even the examples he uses often come from those sources. Except for an occasional qualification, nothing, for example, could be more conventional than Nietzsche's account of "Der Tropische Ausdruck (The Tropical Expression)" in the seventh lecture and of "Die Rhetorischen Figuren (The Rhetorical Figures)" in the eighth lecture. His descriptions of tropes ("metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, antonomasia, onomatopoeia, catachresis, metalepsis, epithet, allegory, irony, periphrasis, hyperbaton, anastrophe, parenthesis, and hyperbole" [53-55]) depend on the traditional distinction between the literal use of a word and its transferred uses: "Bei den Tropen handelt es sich um Übertragungen: Wörter statt anderer Wörter gesetzt: an Stelle des Eigentlichen das Uneigentliche. (Tropes deal with transferences: words are used instead of other words: the figurative is used instead of the literal)" (64, 65). (A more literal translation of the last phrase would be: "in place of the proper the improper.")

Such formulations depend on an unambiguous concept of literal or proper language. They presuppose that literal meanings are prior to figurative meanings: "Die eigentlichen Bedeutungen erscheinen so als die älteren, schmucklosen. (The proper meanings, therefore, seem to be the older, plainer ones)" (52, 53). First there is the literal word that calls a ship's prow a prow. Such words are authorized, made proper, by their direct relation to the thing they name. There, before our eyes, is the front of the boat. We properly or with propriety call that the prow. The truth value of such language is a truth of correspondence or adequatio. The complex Aristotelian epistemology connecting the seeing and naming of a thing with access to its essential form lies behind and supports the notion of proper language. With the literal or proper name firmly in place, the tropical expression is then brought in, or carried over, from its own literal meaning to substitute for that proper name. Now the transferred literal term is used figuratively in place of the literal expression. The improper displaces the proper. We say, "The ship plows the waves." Tropes, it can be seen, are a matter of transference or changing places. The figurative word takes the place of the literal word, the improper the place of the proper. Tropes are usurping placeholders.

Along with this quite traditional theory of tropes is present even in Nietzsche's early works a quite different concept of figurative language. This too comes from Nietzsche's sources, especially Gustav Gerber's *Die Sprache als Kunst*. Gerber, in turn, served as a conduit to Nietzsche for the theories of language in German Romanticism, in Friedrich Schegel, Novalis, Jean Paul Richeter, and others. But Nietzsche would already have known these authors through his training in German literature and idealist philosophy at
Schulpforte and the University of Leipzig. The copresence and mutual interference of two ideas about tropes constitutes the originality and interest of Nietzsche's early writings on rhetoric. According to the alternative theory, interwoven inextricably with the other, all words are aboriginally metaphorical transferences. No proper language exists. The "proper" is already "improper." "Truth" is therefore not grounded in access through the senses to the essence of the thing. Truth is rather a conventionally agreed upon set of lies. Truth is lie not in the sense that it can be measured as false against some attainable correct naming. Truth is lie in the sense that it claims a false grounding in things as they are, when in fact it is constitutive, not constative.

Here is the crucial paragraph in "Über Wahrheit und Lüge":

Was ist also Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden, und die nach langem Gebrauche einem Volke fest, canonisch und verbindlich dünken: die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, daß sie welche sind, Metaphern, die abgenutzt und sinnlich kraftlos geworden sind, Münzen, die ihr Bild verloren haben und nun als Metall, nicht mehr als Münzen in Betracht kommen. (182)

What is truth? a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned, and after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation. Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they are illusions, worn-out metaphors without sensory impact, coins which have lost their image and now can be used only as metal, and no longer as coins. (250)

This passage has been frequently interpreted, explicitly or implicitly. Nevertheless, it needs to be read carefully again here in the context of the particular questions I am raising now. One obvious feature of the paragraph is the way Nietzsche uses figures to talk about a truth that exists only as a fabric of figures. This already contradicts Nietzsche's apparent goal: to give clear conceptual knowledge of what truth is. Along with being told that truths are illusions, we are told that truth is a mobile army and that truth is a worn coin. Each figure Nietzsche uses has its own implications. To call truth a "mobile army" is to ascribe to that swarm of figures a martial function. Those metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms are engaged in a Blitzkrieg. A Blitzkrieg against what? Presumably against the knowledge that these illusions are illusions. This army of tropes has force. It is a force irresistibly bringing about a forgetting. Ultimately a whole nation, ein Volk, using that language is bewitched by the figures into forgetting the figures are figures, the illusions illusions. As Nietzsche puts this in "Über Wahrheit und Lüge," the human situation is to be "clinging to a tiger's back in dreams" (247). The image of the army and the image of the tiger join a long series of violent figures in the essay. These figures suggest that the human condition is one of extreme danger. We forget the figures are figures and take them as truthtelling concepts, solid, canonical, and binding. To make this aboriginal
error of taking a figure literally is not a benign or noble illusion. Rather, it is like living in danger of being eaten by a tiger we do not even know is there because we are sound asleep on its back.

The concluding metaphor saying truths are coins which have lost their image seems clear enough until you begin to think about it. Then it can be seen to be an example of what it talks about. It is a figure whose conceptual value is too easy to take at face value, as we use a coin without bothering about what it is made of. Figurative language is to the illusory literal or conceptual language derived from it as a coin stamped with the image that makes it a coin worth so much in a given currency is to that same coin when its image has been worn away to invisibility and the coin has become a mere piece of metal. I conflate literal and conceptual language because Nietzsche does so, for example in his account of the way the word “leaf” falsely subsumes all the variety of leaves, no two of which are alike, under the general concept of “leaf.” Truth (in the sense of the conventional, illusory truth a “folk” accepts) is like a coin that no longer has its image. A little reflection will show that something is wrong with this figure. The functioning of the figure depends on the traditional Aristotelian definition of a figure as a substitution for a literal word. But Nietzsche is putting just that hierarchy into question. When the image is worn from the coin, the bare metal beneath is revealed. This is supposed to correspond to the figure when it is taken literally as a concept or a literal term. But the bare metal is rather the underlying meaningless matter, substratum of the image. The image gives the metal meaning, makes it a coin. A bare piece of metal is hardly an appropriate image for the columbarium of concepts Nietzsche describes later in the essay as a figure for a fully established canonical language. The image makes the metal something that passes current as a value among the folk of a particular nation, just as it is the figure taken literally that is solid, canonical, and binding. The crisscross of substitutions put in play by the figure does not correspond to the concept. The figure rather obscures or reverses the putative concept. The image on the coin is more like the concept that gives the coin value, while the underlying metal is more like the sensible figure that sustains it. Nietzsche seems to have got his lines crossed in making the crisscross of substitutions.

Far from untangling or reversing the play of substitutions that has made us take illusion as truth, far from putting real truth in place of the illusory truth of figure, as Nietzsche’s formulations promise to do, his figure of the coin worn bare reasserts the illusion it would demystify. This occurs another way in what happens to the figure of force in the passage. If the mobile army of tropes has military force, the kind of force brute physical nature has, the return of the coin to bare metal, that is to brute physical nature, deprives the coin of sensible force and renders it “kraftlos,” powerless. The two attributions of force are not congruent or logically coherent. Nietzsche’s attempt to use figure to demystify the power of figures has reasserted that power in a way
giving only an illusory clarity. Rather than substituting a tropical expression for a literal one, an improper expression for a clear and distinct proper one, Nietzsche has substituted one trope for another and has remained always within the same domain of tropical language. The figure of the coin substitutes for the initial conceptual formulation about the way truth is a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms. The figure "illustrates" the concept in a sensible figure, making it easier to understand, though nevertheless still subservient to it. But the original conceptual formulation was already a figure, the figure of an army. The new figure of the coin displaces the initial figure of the army. The operation of Nietzsche's language gives an example of what he is claiming to talk about in clear conceptual language, but that fact prevents his language from being conceptual, clear, or literal. It does not and cannot give the knowledge it promises, since no metalanguage exists taking us outside the illusions of ordinary language, its taking of figurative language as literal, the improper as proper. This should come as no surprise, since by Nietzsche's own account no proper language exists for which the army of figures he presents is the displacement.9

Literal and Figurative Language

Is this erasure of the traditional relation between literal and figurative language anticipated at all in the lectures on classical rhetoric, given just a few months before "On Truth and Lying" was written? The evidence given so far would suggest that it is not. This would lead to a plausible scenario, even though the publication already in 1872 of The Birth of Tragedy shows that "On Truth and Lying" did not spring from nowhere. Nevertheless, it might be argued that Nietzsche presented to his students during the school year a conventional and derivative account of ancient rhetoric. Then in the summer of 1873 he developed his own rhetorical theory, something that anticipates or contains in germ the ideas about morality, language, and rhetoric of the "mature Nietzsche," the Nietzsche of The Genealogy of Morals or of the so-called Will to Power. A little more reading in the lectures on rhetoric shows that this teleological scenario is false. The ideas about tropes, language, and rhetoric in "Über Wahrheit und Lüge" are already fully sketched out in the third lecture of "Darstellungen der Antiken Rhetorik," "Verhältnis des Rhetorischen zur Sprache (The Relation of the Rhetorical to Language)." This lecture systematically undoes the presuppositions about language, rhetoric, and tropes that are the basis of ancient rhetoric. Formulations almost identical to those in "On Truth and Lie" already occur. The latter might be defined as an expansion of the third lecture in the course. That third lecture was taken chiefly from Gerber, often word for word, as the concordance prepared by Anthonie Meijers and Martin Stingelin shows.10

That third lecture develops a series of interrelated propositions. All language is figurative from the beginning. It is tropological because it is
based on a sequence of displacements from a forever unknowable reality. Therefore, the distinction between literal and figurative language is false. No literal language exists. This means that the distinction between rhetoric as knowledge of tropes and rhetoric as knowledge of various persuasive techniques is also false, as is the distinction between rhetoric and ordinary language. Classical rhetoric employed tropes as one way to aid persuasion, as Nietzsche shows in detail in his account of the various forms of rhetoric: forensic, epideictic, deliberative. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, following Gerber, rhetoric as persuasion and rhetoric as tropes are the same, since all language is tropological and the tropes persuade. All language is persuasive rather than truth-telling. All language is primordially rhetorical. The means of this persuasion is the figurative displacements of all language. The latter is not a possible persuasive force in language freely manipulated by an orator to achieve a certain goal; it is an irresistible persuasive power built into a given language from the beginning. This force persuades the users of that language to take a pack of lies as the truth.

"Alle Wörter aber," says Nietzsche, "sind an sich und von Anfang an, in Bezug auf ihre Bedeutung, Tropen. (But, with respect to their meanings, all words are tropes in themselves, and from the beginning)" (22, 23). A little later: "Eigentlich ist alles Figuration, was man gewöhnlich Rede nennt. (What is usually called language is actually all figuration)" (24, 25). It follows from this that "die Tropen treten nicht dann und wann an die Wörter heran, sondern sind deren eigenst Natur. Von einer 'eigentlichen Bedeutung,' die nur in speziellen Fällen übertragen würde, kann gar nicht die Rede Sein. (The tropes are not just occasionally added to words but constitute their most proper nature. It makes no sense to speak of a 'proper meaning' which is carried over to something else only in special cases)" (24, 25).

It follows, "in turn," or by a further displacement, from this rejection of literal meaning that no separation can be made between “natural” language and rhetorical language. All language is already rhetorical through and through. It “desires” not to give true knowledge of the essence of things but to persuade its users to accept a set of illusions as true. Nietzsche's personification of language here as a being with desires not only uses one of the primary tropes, prosopopoeia, he identifies, it also displaces the orator's conscious desire to persuade—for example, the lawyer trying to persuade the court of his guilty client's innocence—to the unconscious workings of language:

Es giebt gar keine unrhetorische "Naturlichkeit" der Sprache, an die man appellieren könnte: die Sprache selbst ist das Resultat von lauter rhetorischen Künsten. Die Kraft, welche Aristoteles Rhetorik nennt, an jedem Dinge das heraus zu finden und geltend zu machen, was wirkt und Eindruck macht, ist zugleich das Wesen der Sprache: diese bezieht sich ebensowenig wie die Rhetorik auf das Wahre, auf das Wesen der Dinge, sie will nicht belehren, sondern eine subjektive Erregung und Annahme auf Andere übertragen. (20)
There is obviously no unrhetorical "naturalness" of language to which one could appeal; language itself is the result of purely rhetorical arts. The power to discover and to make operative that which works and impresses, with respect to each thing, a power which Aristotle calls rhetoric, is, at the same time, the essence of language; the latter is based just as little as rhetoric is upon that which is true, upon the essence of things. Language does not desire to instruct, but to convey to others a subjective impulse and its acceptance. (21)

Nietzsche’s theory of language, in particular his rejection of the traditional distinction between literal and figurative words, follows naturally and inevitably from his presuppositions about the human epistemological situation. This is an important point in my argument. Aristotle defines figurative language as a double displacement of literal language. The literal word is displaced by a figurative one that has itself been displaced from its literal meaning. We say, “The ship plows the waves.” This account of figure, as I have said, is inextricably tied to the assumption that we have direct access, through our senses, to the true essence of things. Literal names record and take possession of the truth of things as they are. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, following again his sources, human beings are forever cut off from the truth about things by the mediated nature of their access to things through the senses and by way of the body. It follows from this situation, again as something inextricably tied to it, that all language is tropological displacement, figurative names for an unknown and forever unknowable “ignotum.” The prow of that ship is not there before our eyes. We “see” only a nerve excitation; so “prow” is already a figure. To say “the ship plows the waves” substitutes one figure for another, not a figurative word for a literal one. This is argued first in the third lecture of “Darstellung der Antiken Rhetorik” and then in a similar way in “Über Wahrheit und Lüge.” In both cases the claim is that so-called literal language is already the result of a whole series of figurative displacements:

Man, who forms language, does not perceive things or events, but impulses: he does not communicate sensations, but merely copies of sensations. The sensation, evoked through a nerve impulse, does not take in the thing itself: this sensation is presented externally through an image. But the question of how an act of the soul can be presented through a sound image must be asked. If completely accurate representation is to take place, should the material in which it is to be represented, above all, not be the same as that in which the soul works? However, since it is something alien—the sound—how then...
can something come forth more accurately as an *image*? It is not the things that pass over into consciousness, but the manner in which we stand toward them, the *pithanon* (power of persuasion (plausibility; also a thing producing illusion)). The full essence of things will never be grasped. (21, 23)

This short passage is a systematic dismantling of Aristotelian epistemology and its replacement by the claim that every human being is enclosed not only in the prison house of language but, outside that prison, by another: the prison of false nerve impulses that give us no direct access to the "essence of things." A given word naming some putative thing is the result not just of one, but of a whole series of displacements that can metaphorically all be called metaphors. The thing produces a nerve impulse. The nerve impulse produces a sensation, a mental image. The sensation is then expressed in a sound, the spoken word. This is another metaphorical displacement, since the spoken word is by no means of the same substance as the sensation-image but merely stands for it. It is in this sense that for Nietzsche "all words are tropes, in themselves, and from the beginning." They are tropes for that forever unavailable "mysterious x." It follows from this that what are ordinarily thought of as primary tropes, metaphor and metonymy, are no more than secondary displacements of the primary displacements producing language in the first place. This is what Nietzsche means when he says, "Die zweite Form des Tropus ist die *Metapher*. (The second form of the *tropus* is the metaphor)" (22, 23). In fact, metaphor "proper" would be the fourth degree of metaphorical displacement: from the nerve excitation to the sensation to the image of that sensation in a spoken word to the displacement of that word to a new use. Nietzsche says just this in a passage in "On Truth and Lying" that corresponds closely to the account of the origin of language in the third lecture:

Das "Ding an sich" (das würde eben die reine folgenlose Wahrheit sein) ist auch dem Sprachbildner ganz unfasslich und ganz und gar nicht erstrebenswerth. Er bezeichnet nur die Relationen der Dinge zu den Menschen und nimmt zu deren Ausdrucke die kühnsten Metaphern zu Hülfe. Ein Nervenreiz zuerst übertragen in ein Bild! Erste Metapher. Das Bild wieder nachgeformt in einem Laut! Zweite Metapher. Und jedesmal vollständig Überspringen der Sphäre, mitten hinein in eine ganz andre und neue. . . Wir glauben etwas von den Dingen selbst zu wissen, wenn wir von Bäumen, Farben, Schnee und Blumen reden, und besitzen doch nichts als Metaphern der Dinge, die den ursprünglichen Wesenheiten ganz und gar nicht entsprechen . . . nimmet sich das räthselhaft x des Dings an sich einmal als Nervenreiz, dann als Bild, endlich als Laut aus.

The "thing-in-itself" (which would be pure, disinterested truth) is also absolutely incomprehensible to the creator of language and not worth seeking. He designates only the relations of things to men, and to express these relations he uses the boldest metaphors. First, he translates a nerve stimulus into an image! That is the first metaphor. Then, the image must be reshaped into a sound! The second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of spheres—from one sphere to the center of a completely different, new one. . . When we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers, we believe we know something about the things themselves, although what we have are just
metaphors of things, which do not correspond at all to the original entities. . . . [T]he mysterious \( x \) of the thing appears first as a nerve stimulus, then as an image, and finally as a sound. (248)

Nietzsche's assertion that all language is originally metaphorical must be distinguished from similar assertions by Rousseau and Condillac in the eighteenth century. Each has a different historical placement, a different location within the history of ideas. Rousseau and Condillac, in a different way in each case, hold to an empirical or Lockean epistemology. For Rousseau, for example, it is not some unhappy enclosure in a world of nerve excitation that leads the exemplary maker of the first metaphors to call a man a giant. It is a misinterpretation born of fear. Nietzsche's explanation of why all language is tropological, on the other hand, is rooted in nineteenth-century physiology and psychology. If you have a different conception of nerves, brain, body, senses, and consciousness, you will have a different notion of the origin of language and of the relation of language to reality. Nietzsche's ideas about nerve stimuli, sensations, the separation of what he calls "spheres," and our inability to confront the essence of things directly are essential to his theory of language, tropes, and rhetoric, not adventitious components of it. The same thing can be said of Aristotle. His ideas about \textit{energeia}, \textit{enargeia}, essence, being, form, and so on, are the presupposed background of the \textit{Poetics} and the \textit{Rhetoric}.

What then are we to make of the passages I cited earlier from the lectures on rhetoric in which Nietzsche appears to reaffirm the traditional formulation that makes figurative language a displacement of an original literal language? These passages must be a species of indirect discourse or erlerbte Rede. Nietzsche is repeating as a good pedagogue should what the authors he is telling his students about said and believed. Another way to put this is to say that the lectures on ancient rhetoric are, with the exception of the third lecture and a few touches here and there revealing what Nietzsche really thought, ironical through and through. They are the ironically solemn repetition of a colossal, centuries-long mistake, a mistake based on a false idea of language and epistemology that dominated both Greek and Roman ideas about rhetoric. Only rarely does Nietzsche allow his own opinions to break through the ironic deadpan miming of what Aristotle, Quintillian, and the rest had to say. An example is his comment on Quintilian's distinction between popular tropes and rhetorical tropes: "Thus, the popular tropes originated from embarrassment and stupidity (Verlegenheit und Dummheit), the rhetorical tropes from art and delight (Kunst und Wohlgefallen)." "This," says Nietzsche firmly, "is an entirely false contrast (ganz falscher Gegensatz)," as indeed it would be if he is right in refusing to distinguish between ordinary language and rhetorical language (52, 53). A moment earlier Nietzsche had quoted Jean Paul Richter as being right where the ancients were wrong when he said in the \textit{Vorschule der Aesthetik} that "each
language is a dictionary of faded metaphors (ein Wörterbuch erblasster Metaphern)" (52, 53). Though Nietzsche's early writings on rhetoric are an event, a decisive moment in the history of rhetoric, the ideas in them are by no means absolutely new. They have an immediate history in German Romanticism and a much longer history going back to a counter tradition within Greek and Roman rhetoric. In the other direction, I have of course only begun to tell the story of Nietzsche and rhetoric. That story might culminate in an attempt to understand the reasons for the form of Also Sprach Zarathustra or for Nietzsche's dependence on the aphoristic fragment. That work must be deferred to another place.

A Counter-Mode of Composition
Nietzsche's early writings on rhetoric are a strong challenge to the authority of presuppositions about rhetoric within the long tradition of Western metaphysics. This tradition goes from Aristotle down to assumptions about English composition still of great force today. But Nietzsche's writing is also an example of the way this tradition cannot be successfully challenged in conceptual polemics. Through the anti-Aristotelian use of figure in the passages I have cited, through the use of fable in the opening paragraphs of "Über Wahrheit und Lüge," through the radical irony implicit in the inconsistencies of the course on rhetoric, Nietzsche sketches a counter-mode of composition that his later works more elaborately exemplify. It by no means goes without saying that everyone would wish to put in question the ideology underlying standard notions of correct writing. The great classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Nietzsche's schoolfellow at the Schulpforte and his grand antagonist in the debate over Der Geburt der Tragodie, might be taken as a representative defender of the Western tradition as it has been interpreted in later centuries. Much is at stake in a decision, such as Nietzsche took, to oppose that tradition. Moreover, some who want to challenge the ideology embodied in stylistic standards of clarity and coherence might not wish to follow just Nietzsche's alternative. Nevertheless, his work shows that a change in concepts about rhetoric and the intellectual tradition to which it belongs demands a change in style.

Nietzsche's early work, finally, also exemplifies the close tie between reading and writing for which I am arguing. Nietzsche's reading of ancient rhetoric and the best modern scholarship of his day on that rhetoric uncovered a contradiction within rhetoric and the commentary on it. His writing out of the lectures was a quietly ironic bringing into the open of that contradiction. "Über Wahrheit und Lüge," written just after the course, was an overt expression of Nietzsche's position and an exemplification of the style appropriate to it. In Nietzsche, reading and writing go together, as I have said they always do. My own essay in turn is an act of writing that is product of an act of reading, in this case a reading of Nietzsche. Though I have
of course tried to be as clear, correct, and coherent as possible, to ward off beforehand the policing of the copyeditor, I too have found it necessary to use a somewhat oblique parable or fable to say what I have found myself saying. And who knows? There may even be some irony here and there in what I have said.

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Notes

1See Althusser 127-86, especially pages 171-77.

2See Leo for a characteristically tendentious report. According to Leo, "The new multicultural ethic, shown clearly in doctrinal writings both inside and outside the school systems, is contemptuous of tolerance and 'information dominant' (i.e. neutral) teaching. The key words, 'positive teaching' and 'appreciating diversity,' mean that certain sets of ideas are about to be 'infused' as valuable, whether parents think so or not." But of course there is no such thing as neutral teaching, teaching that does not infuse certain sets of ideas. Why the furor? Quite a lot is at stake here. As Althusser says, "No class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses" (146). Changes in grade school readers, not to speak of the many changes in the disciplines and programs in higher education, are signs that state power is shifting. Those in power are, not surprisingly, taking such steps as they can to keep that from happening. Their strength should not be underestimated. See, for example, Bennett.

3If on the one hand Jacques Derrida in the JAC interview defended from his own experience the rigorous discipline whereby French students learn to write correctly, his own practice stretches that standard of correctness to its limits and perhaps beyond (Olson). Following the normal rules of French composition would not teach you to write like Derrida. See, for example, what he says about a particularly exuberant passage of wordplay and syntax-twisting in "Fors": "Point de jeu, ici, sur les mots ou sur la syntaxe, pointe de contamination gratuite, seulement les contraintes de cette topique singulière. Celle-ci produit la nécessité de ce langage avant d’être écrite en ses tournures bizarres, ses équivoques syntaxiques, ses dehors ressemblants" (21).

4For a bilingual version of the lectures on ancient rhetoric and an English translation of "On Truth and Lying," see Gilman et al. But readers should be aware that this edition must be used with circumspection. For a challenge to its accuracy and scholarship, see Bierl and Calder. For an annotated French version of Nietzsche's early writings on rhetoric, see Nietzsche "Rhetoric." For the German of "Uber Wahrheit und Lüge," I have used the bilingual German and French edition: Nietzsche, Das Philosophenbuch. Page references are to these editions and are given in the text.

5See Bierl and Calder 364.

6For an account of Aristotelian epistemology, see a brilliant unpublished paper by Jonathan Cohen. Also see Lear.

7See Stingelin 346-49, and Meijers and Stingelin.

8See Derrida, "Mythologie" 247-324; de Man 239-43; Lacoue-Labarthe; Warminski; Miller 247-61. Lacoue-Labarthe's essay is a comprehensive discussion of Nietzsche's early writing on rhetoric.

9Another way to formulate this, as Steven Mailloux reminds me, would be to say that the initial distinction between literal and metaphorical language breaks down, leaving a single realm of language that is neither literal nor figurative. But that distinction underwrites the possibility of answering a question about what something is: "Was ist also Wahrheit?" In the disappearance of the distinction between literal and figurative language, the possibility of answering in literal
language questions about what something is also vanishes. It is replaced by a potentially endless series of catachreses for an unknown x. Since that x remains forever unknown, it cannot ever be literally named. What is truth? Well, I cannot give you an answer to that in so many literal words. I can only answer in one or another catachresis. Truth is a mobile army. Truth is a worn coin.

10See Meijers and Stingelin 352-60.

11"Über Wahrheit und Lüge" begins as follows:

In some remote corner of the universe that is poured out in countless flickering solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the most arrogant and the most untruthful moment in "world history"—yet indeed only a moment. After nature had taken a few breaths, the star froze over and the clever animals had to die.

Someone could invent such a fable and still not have illustrated adequately how pitiful, how shadowy and fleeting, how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect appears within nature. (246)

12For an excellent recent account of Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, see Calder.

Works Cited


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