Mataphor and Metaphysics: The End of Philosophy and Derrida

Jonathan Rée*


Christopher Norris, *The Deconstructive Turn: Essays in the Rhetoric of Philosophy*, Methuen, 201pp., £4.95, 1983

I ENDs AND MEANS

In 'The Ends of Man' - one of the ten essays, first published between 1967 and 1972, which make up *Margins of Philosophy* - Derrida refers to an almost-forgotten figure in French philosophy: Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre's concept of human existence - 'réalité-humaine' - was intended, Derrida reminds us, to do away with 'all the presuppositions which had always constituted the concept of the unity of man'. However, as Derrida points out, Sartre never really distanced himself from traditional humanism: the 'unity of human-reality' was never doubted, and there remained 'an uninterrupted metaphysical familiarity with that which, so naturally, links the we of the philosopher to the we men', to the we in the horizon of humanity'. So, in spite of his respect for 'history', Sartre avoided examining 'the history of the concept of man'; he wrote 'as if the sign "man" had no origins, no historical, cultural or linguistic limit' (*Margins*, pp. 115-6).

Derrida's criticism of Sartre's humanism is based on the observation that the phrase 'human-reality' is 'a translation of Heideggerian *Dasein*: a monstrous translation in many respects, but so much the more significant'. This is Derrida in characteristic form: a Germanist, reproaching his French colleagues for their misappropriation of the philosophical classics - and the classics of French philosophy, as is well known, are German: the 'three Hs' (Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger), together with their version of the history of philosophy, beginning with Heraclitus.

The Derridean procedure was unveiled to French readers in 1967, when he published three books - *Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena* - all translated into English long ago. They are wayward works: a magpie's collection of quotations from the philosophical canon, with surprising, charming, alarming suggestions as to what they may or may not, intentionally or unintentionally, signify: a set of quizzical commentaries, rather than a direct exposition and defence of defined theoretical lines, and a tease or a torment to any reader hoping for a straight journey from beginning, through middle, to end.

Take *Grammatology*, for example: the title means 'theory of writing' and so you might expect discussions of literacy, of the relations of script to print, or of attempted histories and classifications of writing-systems. In fact, though, the book offers you a disorienting tour through various philosophical comments on meaning, from Plato to Saussure, culminating in an analysis of Rousseau's 'Essay on the Origin of Languages'. Over and over again, Derrida catches philosophers in the act of denouncing writing as inferior, improper, unnatural and deviant compared with speech, which they celebrate, by contrast, as comfortably redolent of human meaning.

It is not made very clear to readers (it was certainly not clear to me, when I first read *Grammatology*) what the purpose of Derrida's performance is intended to be. Probably we had not noticed before that the Great Dead Philosophers show a curious favouritism towards speech; but now that it was pointed out, it was still not obvious that their preference had any more claim on our philosophical attention than, say, Bishop Berkeley's eccentric zeal for tar-water. I have since realised, however, that what was being proposed in *Grammatology* was not a theory of speech and writing, but a theory of philosophy, or rather, of metaphysics, according to Derrida, the 'history of metaphysics, according to the theory, is a seductive but disastrous fantasy of absolute knowledge; it is what happens when you try to abstract a single, unified meaning from the contingent and determinate congeries of events; and the philosophers' paeans about the living immediacy of speech as opposed to the dead, dispersed permanence of writing were really, according to *Grammatology*, all part of the absolutist metaphysical conspiracy.

Derrida's concern with the concept of metaphysics leads back to his constant reference-point: Heidegger. From the 1920s to the 1970s, Heidegger felt the weight of world-history bearing down on his project of rediscovering the original wonder of 'The Question of Being' - a question forever begged and buried, as he saw it, in the whole history of Western Metaphysics*, from the ancient Greeks till now: a neglect which was leading, he believed, to a Spenglerian 'decline' of something called 'the West'. Language, according to Heidegger, was exhausted. The life had gone out of it; 'Being' had shrunk to a grammatical banality, in the third person singular of the present indicative, '... is ...', 'this is thus'. Tracing the question back, through two-and-a-half millennia in which 'Western thought' was supposedly bleeding to death through the wound of the crass metaphysical absolutism to which he gave the eighteenth-century name of 'ontotheology', Heidegger hoped to recover the original sense of ousia or 'Being' and so to undo the damage wrought by the bungling absolutist metaphysicians.

The poignancy of Heidegger's writing is that it bonds

* I am grateful to Peter Dews for pointing out errors in an early draft of this essay.
tragic resignation with utopian or apocalyptic hopes: it both needs and refuses historical and political optimism. The call to put an end to the West's metaphysical forgetfulness about Being might be an urgent summons to a bold and definitive deed, destined to alter civilisation's course. Alternatively, the duty of combating metaphysics and thereby reinvigorating it might be perpetual, re-imposed more gravely with each step towards its accomplishment.

It was these ambiguous Heideggerian themes - of metaphysics and the Decline of the West - that Derrida began to work with in the 1930s, except that Derrida believed that Heidegger had not gone far enough. So he turned Heidegger's invocations on themselves, and blamed the metaphysical absolutism, which he followed Heidegger in rejecting, on the Heideggerian disquiet about metaphysics found in Grammatology. Derrida invited us to witness, in the comments of the Great Philosophers on irrationality and unnaturalness, an unstoppable 'Return of the Repressed'. Error was the secret Truth of metaphysics; and so the separation of Truth from Error was itself a figure of deluded metaphysical fantasy. By an ironic fate, these metaphysicians, hoping to escape from the imprisonment of the Heideggerian disquiet about metaphysics found in Grammatology, their theme is that metaphysics is, essentially, a crafty but delusional textual device which tries to draw a boundary round itself to exclude threats to its philosophical significance and contingency, symbolised by the palpably inert, dead traces which are writing as opposed to speech. And then there was the suspicion that the old metaphysicians, in their desperate attempts to keep presence pure, were really demonstrating their unconscious love for what they denounced as corruption. So if you attend to the classics of Western philosophy properly, you ought to see how writing and all that it is to take to symbolise - error, irregularity, incomprehensibility and all the other enemies of metaphysics - really the true author of the fantasy of metaphysical presence could never have been framed. To use the language of Hollywood Freudianism, Derrida invited us to witness, in the comments of the Great Philosophers on irrationality and unnaturalness, an unstoppable 'Return of the Repressed'. Error was the secret Truth of metaphysics; and so the separation of Truth from Error was itself a figure of deluded metaphysical fantasy.

At the end of it all, the discomfited Aristos is left whining, ridiculous and in defence of the philosophy-profession: 'If only you had reasoned by the rules, I could have refuted your arguments without difficulty!' (Le Jardin, p. 223). Some would make the same complaint about Derrida, as he gets us to take a ride with Aristos and Polyphils, promising that we shall then be able to 'watch the configuration of our problem, along with its theoretical and historic conditions; take sharply by means the logic implicit in this text'. To our anticipated delight, the journey will result in our seeing in Polyphils's words the proto-Heideggerian view of metaphysics as a confection of symbols which 'have lost their original brilliance and picturesqueness' along with their natural flavour of 'ancient Oriental mythology': 'By an ironic fate, these metaphysicians, hoping to escape from the imprisonment of the Heideggerian disquiet about metaphysics found in Grammatology, their theme is that metaphysics is, essentially, a crafty but delusional textual device which tries to draw a boundary round itself to exclude threats to its philosophical righteousness, thus producing the illusion of pure communion in the presence of Being, or of absolute knowledge. As Derrida puts it in his Introduction (and, otherwise excellent translator unfortunately adds an extra burden of portentousness to Derrida's prose by transliterating ordinary French words into rare and precious English:

... if they appear to remain marginal to some of the great texts in the history of philosophy, these ten writings in fact ask the question of the margin.... They interrogate philosophy beyond its meaning, treating it not only as a discourse but as a determined text inscribed in a general text, enclosed in the representation of its own margin (p. xxii) Throughout the rest of the book, the classic philosophers - especially Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, and philosophers of language from Rousseau to Saussure and Benveniste - are exhibited as unwitting participants in an ancient word-game known as 'Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy'. The longest and most thorough essay in Margins is called 'White Mythology', and its subtitle summarises the book's principal argument: 'Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy'. It begins by discussing a short dialogue entitled 'Aristos and Polyphils: or, Metaphysical Language', by Anatole France. (The dialogue appeared in a collection of selections from philosophical essays by France published as Le Jardin d'Épicure in 1900, and translated by Alfred Allinson as The Garden of Epicurus (London, John Lane, 1908.). The dialogue recounts a conversation in which a jovial anti-philosopher named Polyphils challenges a metaphysical straight in the person of Aristos by denouncing metaphysics as an unhealthy, etiolated, barren academicism which shoots up whenever words are uprooted from their native soil of human need and passion. Polyphils has been glumly trying to read a little Manual of Philosophy - 'one of those little works,' he explains, 'that bring universal wisdom within your grasp'. (It goes through every system from the old Eleatics to the latest Eclectics, ending up with M. Lacheller.) Polyphils continues:

I was just thinking that these metaphysicians, when they use their special vocabulary, are like travelling knife-grinders putting medals and coins to the grindstone instead of knives and scissors, and rubbing off the inscription, the date and the effigy. When they have removed every trace of Queen Victoria, or Kaiser Wilhelm, or the Republic, they proclaim: 'Our coins have nothing English, German or French about them; they have been freed from the confines of space and time; they are no longer worth five shillings; they are of incalculable value, and their currency is limitless.' Quite right too. The tinker's labour has made the words metaphysical instead of physical.... Grant me one thing, Aristos: the words of human language were all originally struck with a material type; and when they were new they represented some sensory image.... So the metaphysicians construct their systems using barely recognisable fragments of the signs with which savages used to express their joys, their longings and their fears.

(Le Jardin, pp. 197-8, 205, 216-7; The Garden, pp. 208-9, 214, 216-7)

If you had reasoned by the rules, I could have refuted your arguments without difficulty!' (Le Jardin, p. 223). Some would make the same complaint about Derrida, as he gets us to take a ride with Aristos and Polyphils, promising that we shall then be able to 'watch the configuration of our problem, along with its theoretical and historic conditions; take sharply by means the logic implicit in this text'. To our anticipated delight, the journey will result in our seeing in Polyphils's words the proto-Heideggerian view of metaphysics as a confection of symbols which 'have lost their original brilliance and picturesqueness' along with their natural flavour of 'ancient Oriental mythology': 'By an ironic fate, these metaphysicians, hoping to escape from the imprisonment of the Heideggerian disquiet about metaphysics found in Grammatology, their theme is that metaphysics is, essentially, a crafty but delusional textual device which tries to draw a boundary round itself to exclude threats to its philosophical righteousness, thus producing the illusion of pure communion in the presence of Being, or of absolute knowledge. As Derrida puts it in his Introduction (and, otherwise excellent translator unfortunately adds an extra burden of portentousness to Derrida's prose by transliterating ordinary French words into rare and precious English:... if they appear to remain marginal to some of the great texts in the history of philosophy, these ten writings in fact ask the question of the margin.... They interrogate philosophy beyond its meaning, treating it not only as a discourse but as a determined text inscribed in a general text, enclosed in the representation of its own margin (p. xxii) Throughout the rest of the book, the classic philosophers - especially Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, and philosophers of language from Rousseau to Saussure and Benveniste - are exhibited as unwitting participants in an ancient word-game known as 'Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy'. The longest and most thorough essay in Margins is called 'White Mythology', and its subtitle summarises the book's principal argument: 'Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy'. It begins by discussing a short dialogue entitled 'Aristos and Polyphils: or, Metaphysical Language', by Anatole France. (The dialogue appeared in a collection of selections from philosophical essays by France published as Le Jardin d'Épicure in 1900, and translated by Alfred Allinson as The Garden of Epicurus (London, John Lane, 1908.). The dialogue recounts a conversation in which a jovial anti-philosopher named Polyphils challenges a metaphysical straight in the person of Aristos by denouncing metaphysics as an unhealthy, etiolated, barren academicism which shoots up whenever words are uprooted from their native soil of human need and passion. Polyphils has been glumly trying to read a little Manual of Philosophy - 'one of those
so, metaphysicians, whilst they take themselves to be protecting the purity of unified meaning, are really just re-furbishing and recirculating the metaphors out of which the idea of non-metaphorical language is made. The idea of metaphor as a special and defective kind of language is itself, therefore, a product of metaphysics, but one which it must presuppose: metaphor and metaphysics circle round each other in reciprocal antagonism.

To sticklers for rigour, the argument is bound to leave something to be desired. In particular, even if you cannot define metaphysics without using metaphors, it does not follow that metaphysical arguments are themselves metaphorical. (You cannot define mathematics precisely, but this does not mean that mathematical arguments are im-precise.) And similarly with linguistics. On the one hand, this does not prove that there can be no non-circular 'metaphorology' of metaphysical language; nor need it be concluded that the concepts of metaphor and metaphysics are endlessly mutually self-undermining.

In spite of these difficulties, though, Derrida is surely justified in trying to turn Heidegger's attempted ending of metaphysics inside out by attacking the activities of metaphor. Just like Heidegger, however, Derrida allows himself to be taken two ways when he alleges that metaphysics must be ended: either an excited incitement to extermi-nate it forwth, or sombre admissions that it will go on for ever. In 1968, it was the former. Lecturing in New York that October, Derrida presented himself as a bold po­litical and methodological battle-of-the-generations 'rhetorician'. For literary criticism itself, it seems, has not attempted the role of political subversive since, and can hardly be meant or taken seriously. Derrida himself, whilst redundant philosophy staff get re­dundant, summaries, rather than through his own writings - he seems to think of deconstruction as a kind of lie-detector, which will expose the tell-tale lapses in authorial 'pres­ence', sufficient to resolve their manifest contradictions' (Turn, p. 66). He rejects scandal and, 'the scandal of deconstruc­tion,' he thinks, is that it disrupts 'some of the most basic pre­sumptions of philosophic-reason' (pp. 7, 12). The essential point about philosophers, according to Norris, is that they do not have the nerve to 'entertain the monstrous idea that the discourse of philosophy is everywhere subject to a play of rhetorical signification'; they are, he taunts, unable to let go of 'the deep-seated logosentric assumption that texts embody a communicative power, and authorial presence, sufficient to resolve their manifest contradictions' (pp. 56, 81). He seems to think of deconstruction as a kind of lie-detector, which will expose the tell-tale lapses in the discourse of the philosophers - 'those moments of text-

Derrida's work is usually Englished under the nursery-like rubric of 'deconstruction' (a term not much used by Derrida himself), and the claim is then made that in 'de­construction' Derrida has supplied us with a transferable technique of 'close-reading', as they call it, applicable to all kinds of 'text' (and it turns out that nothing is anything if not a 'text'). Although 'deconstructionists' often express their doubts about the insistent and dogmatic monopoly of Freudist interpretations, deconstructive 'close-reading' is very similar to psychoanalytic approaches to neurotic symp­toms, as it untangles the elaborate camouflage in which primary processes disguise themselves so as to hoodwink the censor and gain admission to the ordinary conscious mind. Criticism qualifies as deconstructive 'close-reading' when, having 'interrogated' the text, it breaks through the defences and shows that an unsavoury set of delusive binary oppositions - public/private; masculine/feminine; same/other; rational/irrational; true/false; central/peripheral; progressive/reactive; major/minor; real/imaginary; sufficient/excessive, etc., can be found 'inscribed' within it. You will notice that in each of the pairs, the first-mentioned term is, as they put it, 'privileged'. And deconstruction is programmed to demonstrate, in the first instance, that the 'privileged' term depends for its identity on the process (or 'gesture') of excluding its other, thus bearing witness that primacy really belongs to the subordinate term instead. ('The Return of the Repressed'.) But deconstruction will not get so far as the second instance, that the whole abject and habit of thinking about the cause and significance of everything we do is done, when we try to escape them. Collapse of metaphysics and the discontent of the West, and commencement of bacchanalia of 'undecidability' and 'dissemination': philosophy, capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, politics, truth, and, for good measure, 'English literature', are the causes of its birth. A side-show of this is the so-called 'postmodernism' - now largely cut off from the anti-metaphysical philosophy.

Derrida's work is usually Englished under the nursery-like rubric of 'deconstruction' (a term not much used by Derrida himself), and the claim is then made that in 'deconstruction' Derrida has supplied us with a transferable technique of 'close-reading', as they call it, applicable to all kinds of 'text' (and it turns out that nothing is anything if not a 'text'). Although 'deconstructionists' often express their doubts about the insistent and dogmatic monopoly of Freudist interpretations, deconstructive 'close-reading' is very similar to psychoanalytic approaches to neurotic symptoms, as it untangles the elaborate camouflage in which primary processes disguise themselves so as to hoodwink the censor and gain admission to the ordinary conscious mind. Criticism qualifies as deconstructive 'close-reading' when, having 'interrogated' the text, it breaks through the defences and shows that an unsavoury set of delusive binary oppositions - public/private; masculine/feminine; same/other; rational/irrational; true/false; central/peripheral; progressive/reactive; major/minor; real/imagin­ary; sufficient/excessive, etc., can be found 'inscribed' within it. You will notice that in each of the pairs, the first-mentioned term is, as they put it, 'privileged'. And deconstruction is programmed to demonstrate, in the first instance, that the 'privileged' term depends for its identity on the process (or 'gesture') of excluding its other, thus bearing witness that primacy really belongs to the subordinate term instead. ('The Return of the Repressed'.) But deconstruction will not get so far as the second instance, that the whole abject and habit of thinking about the cause and significance of everything we do is done, when we try to escape them. Collapse of metaphysics and the discontent of the West, and commencement of bacchanalia of 'undecidability' and 'dissemination': philosophy, capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, politics, truth, and, for good measure, 'English literature', are the causes of its birth. A side-show of this is the so-called 'postmodernism' - now largely cut off from the anti-metaphysical philosophy.

Derrida's work is usually Englished under the nursery-like rubric of 'deconstruction' (a term not much used by Derrida himself), and the claim is then made that in 'deconstruction' Derrida has supplied us with a transferable technique of 'close-reading', as they call it, applicable to all kinds of 'text' (and it turns out that nothing is anything if not a 'text'). Although 'deconstructionists' often express their doubts about the insistent and dogmatic monopoly of Freudist interpretations, deconstructive 'close-reading' is very similar to psychoanalytic approaches to neurotic symptoms, as it untangles the elaborate camouflage in which primary processes disguise themselves so as to hoodwink the censor and gain admission to the ordinary conscious mind. Criticism qualifies as deconstructive 'close-reading' when, having 'interrogated' the text, it breaks through the defences and shows that an unsavoury set of delusive binary oppositions - public/private; masculine/feminine; same/other; rational/irrational; true/false; central/peripheral; progressive/reactive; major/minor; real/imaginary; sufficient/excessive, etc., can be found 'inscribed' within it. You will notice that in each of the pairs, the first-mentioned term is, as they put it, 'privileged'. And deconstruction is programmed to demonstrate, in the first instance, that the 'privileged' term depends for its identity on the process (or 'gesture') of excluding its other, thus bearing witness that primacy really belongs to the subordinate term instead. ('The Return of the Repressed'.) But deconstruction will not get so far as the second instance, that the whole abject and habit of thinking about the cause and significance of everything we do is done, when we try to escape them. Collapse of metaphysics and the discontent of the West, and commencement of bacchanalia of 'undecidability' and 'dissemination': philosophy, capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, politics, truth, and, for good measure, 'English literature', are the causes of its birth. A side-show of this is the so-called 'postmodernism' - now largely cut off from the anti-metaphysical philosophy.
ual doubt or indecision where philosophy glimpses, and
forthwith repression, its own "literary" status..." (p. 172).

If you challenge a deconstructor for misinterpreting a
text, you are liable to be sneered at for your reliance on some
'metaphysical' ideal of "true" representation' (and the word 'true' will be put in quotes, in case its contamination
should spread). Whatever it is to be called, though, Norris does seem sometimes to miss some good things in the
'texts' he 'interrogates'. For instance, he tackles Wittgenstein, as 'the authority most often appealed to by
those in search of a philosophic case against deconstruct-
tion'; and predictably, the Achilles' Heel of Wittgensteinism
turns out to be metaphor, which is 'a major theme in the
Philosophical Investigations, though one which is often sup-
pressed or occluded when it threatens to surface too insist-
ently' (p. 31). But Norris finds correctly that Wittgenstein by
its general absence.) With the air of a schoolmaster triumphantly
picking open a fistful of stolen Smarties, Norris fastens on a passage in Part Two of the Investiga-
tions, where Wittgenstein wonders what goes on when people have strong intuitions to the effect, for example,
that Wednesday is fat, but Tuesday is lean; or that the
view e is: old hands of Wittgenstein claims that such situations
cannot be explained by saying that words are being endow-
ed with a 'metaphorical sense', if that means a sense which
could be expressed by another word used literally.
'Wednesday is fat' is not a metaphorical way of saying, for instance, that Wednesday is wealthy; nor is it a metaphor
for anything else. The point about such statements is, just as
Wittgenstein says, that 'I want to use these words (with
their familiar meanings (Bedeutungen)) here' (p. 32). But Wittgenstein tolerantly concedes that 'one might speak of a
"primary" and "secondary" sense (Bedeutung) in such a case, though he immediately points out that 'the secondary
sense is not a "metaphorical" sense (eine "übertragene
Bedeutung")'. (Philosophical Investigations, Second Edition,
Oxford, Blackwell, 1958, p. 216. It is perhaps worth noting that
Wittgenstein means 'translated' here as 'transferred', not as
"metapher" but 'übertragung', a word which is more usualy
- for example, when used by Freud - translated as
"transference".)

Norris descends on Wittgenstein's argument with fierce
deconstructive indignation. Wittgenstein, he says, is simply
'shifting attention from the problem of metaphor', and so
Norris fastens on a passage in which Wittgenstein says to
them, 'I have no intention of expressing the uses of analogy, imagery, and point-of-view in philosophical discourse; and surely none of his readers
think that Wittgenstein meant that words literally went
away for their holidays, or that philosophers ought actually
to think that Wittgenstein meant that words literally went
away for their holidays, or that philosophers ought actually
to think that Wittgenstein meant that words literally went
away for their holidays, or that philosophers ought actually
to think that Wittgenstein meant that words literally went
away for their holidays, or that philosophers ought actually
to think that Wittgenstein meant that words literally went
away for their holidays, or that philosophers ought actually
to think that Wittgenstein meant that words literally went
away for their holidays, or that philosophers ought actually
to think that Wittgenstein meant that words literally went
away for their holidays, or that philosophers ought actually
to think that Wittgenstein meant that words literally went
away for their holidays, or that philosophers ought actually
to think that Wittgenstein meant that words literally went
away for their holidays, or that philosophers ought actually
to think that Wittgenstein meant that words literally went
away for their holidays, or that philosophers ought actually
to think that Wittgenstein meant that words literally went
away for their holidays, or that philosophers ought actually
to think that Wittgen

proved by the importance to Wittgenstein's message of his
idiysyncratic literary styles. The same, presumably, could
be said of many other Great Philosophers. Plato, for in-
stance, though lumbered with responsibility for the 'deep
laid assumption that "philosophy" has to do with certain
kinds of truth which are not to be found in "literature"' (p.
1), might more plausibly be presented as one of Derrida's
earliest disciples: the joyous insouciance with which he
used the devices of dialogue, analogy, irony, allegory, par-
able and myth suggest that he may never actually have
practised the kind of philosophy which the Derridians
would deconstruct him for. Or take Locke, presented by Norris as
ridiculously attempting 'to purge his discourse of all meta-
phorical residues, a project doomed to failure by the
radical metaphoricity of the language.' (p. 35.) Even the
proverb and self-conscious figuration in nearly every page
that Locke wrote, he must have been a crypto-deconstruc-
tionist too.

It would be ingenious, surely, to conclude that philo-
osophy is capitulating, after two thousand years, to the New
Technology of deconstruction: the more reasonable infer-
ence would be that deconstruction supports and promotes
itself by means of self-serving, perverse and indefensible
caricatures of the philosophical classics.

III METAPHOR AND METAPHYSICS

We may assent as Derrida and his followers point to the shifting
metaphors from which an idea of becoming acquainted with absolute truth is framed in the Great
Books of Western Philosophy from Plato to Hegel and beyond. But we may also feel uneasy at the tone of perse-
cution with which it is done. 'Have you ever had any con-
nection with metaphorical organisations? ... Yes? Then your
claims to Truth confound themselves.... Or no? Then you
are deluded, since this is the only way to be saved from
the abundance of philosophical discourse which you think
your own. The idea that metaphysics is the attempt to evade metaphori-
city and you will be licensed to derride (to coin a word),
without more ado, the works of all the Great Dead
Philosophers.

But the concept of metaphor which the Derridians take
as their starting-point is (as Wittgenstein's discussion con-
tinues) a particular case of the metaphor stating-point
which the Derridians claim to be of prime importance in the
generation of philosophical discourse. In a particularly perceptive review of Margins, Arthur
Danto writes that Derrida's 'emphasis on philosophical texts
and "source and guarantee of meaning" (p. 49). Sometimes,
'thinking in metaphysics with a single-minded aim of disclosing guilty complicity with the idea of a 'private language'. We should perhaps locate more closely these key cards in the Derridian pack:
metaphor and metaphysics.

Metaphor, Derrida thinks, primarily means transferring an
epithet from one thing to another. It is easy to see why,
with metaphor so loosely defined, Derridians can come to the
conclusions, first, that all language is metaphorical, and second, that the distinction between literal and meta-
phorical uses of words is impossible. They have difficulty in
recognising the difference between interpreting a word in
the better of them. Wittgenstein's writings, for example,
by no means provide such a straightforward riposte to the
arguments of deconstruction' (p. 35). This, he says, is

32
'metaphor', this conspires to draw attention to local literary effects, such as may be achieved within a phrase, sentence, or a paragraph, as opposed to rhetorical designs on a larger scale - like the delineation of character, the presentation of direct or indirect dialogue, or 'dramatic irony'; in short, it fails to remember such literary processes as narrative, story and plot.

A plot often found in the classics of philosophy is one which depicts a journey, a voyage to enlightenment. This applies, for instance, to Hegel's Phenomenology and Wittgenstein's Tractatus, both of which are so constructed as to lead to a final chapter in which all the perceptions and perspectives presented in previous ones are undermined - thrown away, as Wittgenstein has it, like a ladder once you have climbed it to reach a new vantage. The arrival which is 'metaphysics' is the ending of their books. When you pay attention to their plots, you can see that they were not aspiring to say the last word on anything at all. In such books as these, it is quite misleading to concentrate on metaphor, however it may be defined; and 'close-reading' will turn out to be a euphemism, or indeed a metaphor, for literary myopia.

'Metaphysics' is the other joker in the deconstructionist pack. Heidegger, like Husserl and Hegel before him, supposed that it was the secret of European culture, and so of world history too. Its expression, they assumed, resided in the set of texts which had, by their time, been collected into a consolidated canon called 'the History of Philosophy'. The grouping together of these texts was not arbitrary, but it is salutary to remember that it was not carried out in the a priori spaces of eternal metaphoricity either: it was done in the academic institutions of eighteenth-century Europe; which means that the ceaselessly renewed project of destroying or dispersing 'metaphysics' may be a rather more parochial and academic concern than some of its enthusiasts seem to suppose, and not a matter on which the fate of 'the West' depends after all.

To his great credit, Derrida wonders from time to time whether there isn't a danger in speaking of 'metaphysics' in such a way as to 'erase the differences ... in order to produce a smooth, homogeneous, ahistorical, all-of-a-piece cloth'. However, the fact that he mentions the difficulty does not mean that he has taken its measure. He advocates that the history of metaphysics should be conceived in terms of 'not an origin, but long sequences and powerful systems,' but in practice he assumes that what he calls 'the finite but relatively long sequence called metaphysics' has a simple formula - namely, that it is the result of trying to see meaning in terms of presence, and that the consequent constraints 'are exercised, in constitutive fashion, over the entire history of metaphysics' (Margins, pp. 72-3).

Thus, an implausibly essentialist concept of 'Western metaphysics' continues to dominate Derrida's work, as its perpetually insulted spouse. And Derrida - following Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger - fails to notice how awkwardly most of the canonised books fit in to the canon, or how inadequately or even tantalised by a mistaken idea of absolute knowledge; but they were also inclined to regard it as a deceitful and dangerous promise which on the whole they certainly did not pretend to fulfil in their own writing. Their books used self-conscious literary artistry to conjure up the objects of absolute knowledge not by pretending to write down their descriptions but by telling stories about our perpetual exclusion from them - invoking them, in effect, by a rhetoric of negative insinuation. They are not works of 'metaphysics' as described and mocked by 'deconstruction'.

It may be said that the Great Philosophers were fascinated or even tantalised by a mistaken idea of absolute knowledge; but the same applies, and in the same way, to the person who is determined to 'deconstruct' them. And they were also participating in other kinds of debate, less purely academic: Plato, for example, wrote in order to promote a high-minded conception of law and the state; Descartes, to propound a system of physics based on a principle of the conservation of motion; Hume, to defend a certain kind of conservatism about social and political life; Mill, to fight for science, individualism, and the rights of women. Their works were not bounded by the perimeters which the artificial and claustrophobic notion of 'Western metaphysics' tries to draw round them. It is a pity that Derrida, who - a bit unfairly, by the way - accuses Sartre of failing to recognise the mutuality and factitiousness of his Heideggerian concept of man, should have relied so heavily and uncritically on his own borrowing from Heidegger: namely the fantastic, pretentious and curiously academic concept of 'Western metaphysics'.

KITAP HAFTASI: No 3

33