Article

Reoccupying Metaphor: On the Legitimacy of the Nonconceptual

C. D. Blanton

Department of English, University of California, Berkeley, 94720 CA, USA;
E-Mail: cdblanton@berkeley.edu

Abstract: Hans Blumenberg's magisterial defense of modernity against the reproach of secularization, elaborated most extensively in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966, 1974), develops both a distinctive method of philosophical history and the groundwork of a philosophical anthropology, predicated on the emergence of human self-assertion as theoretical curiosity. But as Blumenberg's work attests more generally, this argument both devolves on and comprises an excursion into metaphorology, transposing the grounds of legitimation from dialectic to rhetoric. This paper explores the implications of such a metaphorical transfer, suggesting that Blumenberg not only presupposes a cryptic mode of poetics, but also (against its own anthropological intention) invests that poetics with the power to negate the category of the human as such.

Keywords: Blumenberg; Hans; metaphor; rhetoric; modernity; legitimacy; reoccupation; philosophical anthropology; metalepsis

Rhetoric, I. A. Richards once famously proposed, "is a study of misunderstanding and its remedies" ([1], p. 3). The suggestion might be pushed further, to suggest that rhetoric names a constitutive style of misapprehension—the fallacy of hoping that misapprehension might offer the ground of an insight, salvaging understanding from misunderstanding—or even the demonstration that such a fallacy might, precisely as fallacy, produce knowledge in spite of itself. Rhetoric, under this thought, not only opposes dialectic; it also mocks it, not merely as formal parody, but also as partial simulation, the source of an understanding itself misunderstood. Rhetoric misunderstands, but it also premises understanding on that misunderstanding.

Richards' turn to rhetoric is designed, at least in part, to address just this difficulty: prompted by the overwhelming sense that the descriptive powers of modern science, impelled by a modern curiosity unleashed and no longer constrained by the ordering certainties of a world teleologically formed, had

forced an epistemological crisis that undermined the very possibility of poetic language, ultimately of art as such. Consigned to the domain and production of the "pseudo-statement" rather than the scientific statement as such, poetry is accordingly sundered from any canon or anchoring category of belief [2]. It is thus implicitly thrown back onto the very term it once resisted, forced to reconstitute a claim to value by way of rhetoric rather than truth—in effect, to salvage knowledge from the epistemological debris of misunderstanding. As experimental science comes to occupy the place and reconstitute the authority of a kind of scholastic realism, standing as the guarantor of epistemological confidence, art labors in nominalist uncertainty, unable to attach its figures to grounds.

Yet misunderstanding seems to claim a kind of formal knowledge nonetheless: even the pseudo-statement retains a propositional form, after all, as if to frame the absence of that quality of veridicality that might legitimate it, ostentatiously mimicking the statement it cannot definitively make. Formally if not functionally, statement and pseudo-statement seem to merge, framing between them the problematic of legitimation as such.

It is this problem of legitimation by way of misunderstanding—the difficulty (or impossibility, perhaps) involved in establishing dialectical authority on rhetorical grounds—that underlies a metaphorology still more capacious than Richards' own, derived from the same history of modern knowledge by which statement and pseudo-statement came to find themselves opposed, but concerned to secure a ground upon which, or so I will argue, a certain poetics emerges: a poetics composed of the theoretical stuff of modernity itself, a knowledge cast adrift from any mooring term but shaped for that very reason in metaphor, from the ineffability of rhetorical misunderstanding. Indeed it is just this problem of apparently ungrounded knowledge, I will suggest, that underlies the imposing apologetic for modernity offered by Hans Blumenberg [3]. Blumenberg's modernity, generated in the ultimate failure of medieval thought to evade the conceptual dilemma of gnosticism, sprouting like weeds among the irresolvable antinomies of late scholastic nominalism, is ultimately nothing less than the narrative of theoretical curiosity itself—a curiosity that, by virtue of its theological modesty, affords an inadvertent place for an emergent human subject of knowledge. But as Blumenberg insists, that human agent originates in rhetoric, more precisely in metaphor, venturing into the vacated space of theological authority by simplest accident. Modernity arises, as it were, in the translation of misunderstanding into understanding.

The question to be posed here, then, lies in the status of that knowledge, in the identification of the ground on which legitimacy itself becomes (metaphorically) possible. For Blumenberg, metaphor seems ultimately to vindicate the practice of human self-assertion, offering the provisional ground of a fully developed anthropology. Less clear, however, is the ultimate fate of the humanism or modernity so conceived. For Blumenberg himself, anthropology's emergence constitutes a posterior truth, a mode of self-legitimation bearing sufficient force to reinscribe the past in retrospect. Insofar as it is metaphor that grants such authority, however, modernity itself must remain open to some reoccupation still unthought. Understood in these terms, I will suggest, metaphorology brings another term into view, displacing the category of rhetoric, through which the present remakes the past, with that of a poetics, through which the future remakes the present.

1. Misunderstandings

The notion of misunderstanding is not one of which Blumenberg typically makes much explicit theoretical use. It does arise at a crucial moment, however, in the larger narrative through which modernity achieves its theoretical separation from a teleological order no longer able to correlate the universal with the particular. Near the conclusion of *The Genesis of the Copernican World* (1975), Blumenberg arrives at the figure who marks the effective destination, if no longer the *telos*, of his larger account of *Neuzeit* [4]. Alongside Nietzsche, whose genealogical method and withering critique of truth quietly license Blumenberg's own, stands the apparently more moderate figure of Kant, seeking to restore the rupture between appearance and essence that medieval nominalism fatefully opened by reserving the force of teleological determinacy and conceptual essence to a hidden God. In this regard, Kant serves as an historical bracket announcing the emergence of a pure anthropology, something like post-enlightenment modernity's Nicholas of Cusa, against the Nietzschean Giordano Bruno. Kant proves unavoidable in the context of Blumenberg's elaboration of the Copernican episteme, primarily because it is Kant who seems to give the figure of the 'Copernican' world its most decisively metaphorical use. Indeed in the famous 1787 preface to the first critique, added to the work's second edition, Kant famously appears to compare himself to Copernicus. The footnote reads:

> In the same way, the central laws of the motion of the heavenly bodies established with certainty what Copernicus assumed at the beginning only as a hypothesis, and at the same time they proved the invisible force (of Newtonian attraction) that binds the universe, which would have remained forever undiscovered if Copernicus had not ventured, in a manner contradictory to the senses yet true, to seek for the observed movements not in the objects of the heavens but in the observer ([5], p. 113).

Kant is attempting to resist the charge, levied against the book's 1781 first edition, of a pure idealism, and seeking at the same time to requalify the audacious "deductive" movement by which understanding, though unable on its own to sponsor a judgment of reason, might nonetheless afford the ground on which the formulation of an *a priori* cognition becomes possible. In effect, everything—from the refutation of Hume's skepticism to the assertion of reason itself by way of the categories—hangs on the point.

The import of that comparison has thus seemed relatively clear to most casual readers, as well as a few more careful ones. Kant is implying, even if not quite claiming, that the recuperation of the possibility of pure reason through critical philosophy constitutes the sign of an epochal break—indeed that the critical passage from understanding to pure reason in some sense *performs* that epochal break, incidentally metaphorizing Kant himself as Copernicus in the process. But for that reason, the comparison has also seemed at least mildly dissonant, perhaps most famously to Bertrand Russell, who found it flatly absurd. For Russell and others to follow, the essentially concentric, even anthropocentric, quality of the Kantian system rendered it (in Russell's phrase) "a Ptolemaic counter-revolution" ([6], p. xi) by implication, meaning that Kant had managed to misunderstand himself rather profoundly, reversing Copernicus' most fundamental achievement by restoring man to his central cosmological place.

Blumenberg is concerned to correct that misprision, arguing in response that it is actually Russell and readers like him who have misunderstood Kant. What we must notice, he insists, is Kant's

literal claim: that the ground of the Copernican comparison lies in *method*, in the boldness of the hypothesis—"analogous", as Kant will suggest, to his own—by which the constrictions of empirical sense are tested by a counter-intuitive, and indeed to that degree counter-factual, movement *against* appearances.

There are, then, two potential misunderstandings at play here, and we are left to weigh one against the other. Has Kant misunderstood himself? Or have we (or at least readers like Russell) misunderstood him? To grasp the weight that hangs on the question, not only in the Kantian system but more generally, we might note the Copernican metaphor's (or analogy's) simple pertinacity. As Blumenberg notes, it effectively recurs a century and more later, when, in his *Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis*, Freud compares the effect of psychoanalysis to that of Copernicus and Darwin, thereby delivering to "human megalomania" its "most wounding blow" in the demonstration that "the ego…is not even master in its own house" ([7], p. 285). That comparison, it is perhaps worth noting (as Blumenberg does not), would later involve Jacques Lacan in an explanation parallel to Blumenberg's own defense of Kant, carefully marking the way in which an apparent anthropocentrism actually produces a radical eccentricism: "I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking." ([8], pp. 429–30). At stake in each instance is the same misprision, though with a different consequence. If Lacan and Freud before him seem concerned to point the way beyond an unreflective humanism, the Kantian turn requires that a certain anthropology be constructed by other means, by the placement of reason itself at a cosmological center, where man might borrow it by analogy.

For Blumenberg, of course, the answer to these questions is quite clear: Kant has been misunderstood. He has not quite meant to say that his thesis is analogous to that of Copernicus (on that question, Lacan perhaps has the better argument about Freud, whose discovery dethrones the Cartesian centrality of consciousness as such). Had Kant said so, had he formed his metaphor in these terms, Russell and the others would have been rightly dismissive. But what Kant has said instead is that his *method*—hypothesis rather than thesis—is analogous to that of Copernicus and that critical philosophy itself thereby represents the testing of an established truth (that of Hume's skepticism) rather than its straightforward demolition.

As a matter of simple attentive reading, Blumenberg seems to be right. Kant does indeed make the narrower claim described, though it remains possible to hear a bit of misplaced grandeur in his choice of the Copernican reference. But there is a problem nonetheless. For in the process of deciding and dispelling one misunderstanding, Blumenberg has spotted another, and this one proves more difficult to resolve satisfactorily. It is true, it turns out, that Kant has not misunderstood himself, whatever we decide to make of his methodological wager: it is exactly a kind of metaphysics by *hypothesis* that is at stake in his analogy. He has, however, Blumenberg notes, indeed insists, *profoundly* misunderstood Copernicus, who cannot really be taken to have done the thing with which Kant credits him, precisely because the terrain of cosmological recognition that Kant invokes as ground is essentially meaningless in Copernicus' own terms, indeed categorically impossible. Kant, that is to say, has misunderstood the entire world that produced Copernicus as a problem (or the solution to one), and even if he grasps this fact at some abstract level, his own system is nonetheless predicated on its eclipse, on the loss of his Copernican metaphorical ground. This is of course to reduce the enormity of Blumenberg's argument, but the problem can be put simply nonetheless. Kant may or may not have been a good Copernican. Copernicus, by contrast, was definitively not. It is exactly the cosmology that Kant can take for

granted that Copernicus made possible, but did not himself share; and that cosmology itself stands as an integral element in the formative and self-coherent logic of Kant's modernity.

In the process of grappling with that contradiction, then, we begin to glimpse an instance of the larger and recursive Blumenbergian problematic. How is it that Copernicus' method can effectively legitimate Kant's, even when it fails to authorize Copernicus' own? At one level, this might be simple. If it is simply the case that Copernicus is not a Copernican, then we are confronting yet *another* series of misunderstandings: historical, theological, philosophical, and scientific—all those discourses that swirl around and through the name Copernicus at the confluence of forces that produce Blumenberg's modernity. But it seems a more difficult thing to predicate a *legitimate* historical truth claim, as Kant must seem to have done, as Blumenberg seems to insist, on *exactly this misunderstanding*.

Yet this is precisely what Blumenberg programmatically does. His very language bears out the point. "The way to the *misunderstanding* [*Mißverständnis*] of [Kant's] footnote", he says, "is paved by its last sentence" ([4], p. 604), on the relation between hypothesis and proof. Of the analogy itself, he observes that the "factor that has contributed to the *misunderstandings* [*Mißverständnissen*]" ([4], p. 605) is an insufficient attention "to a single word of the text" ([4], p. 605), the "first thoughts" with which Copernicus began his exploration, *i.e.*, his theologically orthodox hypothesis (having to do with the teleological self-sufficiency of the cosmos) rather than his epoch-making conclusion (which forced the abandonment of that teleological premise). Indeed a reader like Russell might be exculpated partially by Blumenberg's admission that "Kant's *misunderstandings* [*Selbstmißverständnis*]" ([4], p. 611) derive from that realm of rhetoric that Russell's own version of logic necessarily scorns. They derive, that is, from the hazards of analogy, the dangers of metaphor. And in that problem of analogy lurks the more general problem of rhetoric as such: the study of misunderstanding and its remedies, according to Richards. For Kant, Copernicus "is the one who produces a *metaphor* for the kind of changes that are realized by the revolutions in the history of science in which the lawfulness of the data originates in the influence of the knowing subject" ([4], p. 600). Elsewhere this same metaphor claims "epochal importance" by setting "the reader's constructive imagination in motion even before he has finished reading it" ([4], p. 605), while Kant's own text assumes the role of "a rhetorical instrument and metaphor" ([4], p. 608). Indeed, Blumenberg sighs, misunderstanding seems to mark "the fate, at once splendid and miserable, of a rhetorical element in the context of theory—of its temptations to hermeneutical generosity and easy satisfaction" ([4], pp. 610–11, all emphases added). Reason itself has been purchased by rhetoric.

We are therefore left with an escalating sequence of three conclusions, each of which threatens to devour the last. First, Kant is not in fact wrong in his analogy when he claims Copernicus as metaphor. He understands himself perfectly well. But his underlying metaphor is wrong, is in fact something like a moment of catachresis, which produces the second conclusion. Kant is not merely casually wrong about Copernicus, but essentially so, essentially wrong in an almost embarrassing way, insofar as his misunderstanding effaces or liquidates the very grounds of the Copernican revolution. Or rather, he would be embarrassingly wrong were it Copernicus' world at issue, rather than a metaphorical displacement not merely of Copernicus by Kant, but also of Copernicus' *world* by Kant's own. But this generates the third conclusion. Exactly insofar as his own misunderstanding is enabled by, founded upon, Copernicus, Kant is also historically right—more right in fact than Copernicus himself—offering the very evidence not only of the 'Copernican' world's legitimacy (and indeed its

formal "lawfulness") but also of its historical and theoretical inescapability. In this sense, Kant could not have been otherwise than wrong in the course of being right, a fact that retrospectively reveals the terms of that which Copernicus has wrought, arguably by misunderstanding *himself*, precisely because he had no access to the world that authorizes Kant's own metaphor. "For the interpretation of Kant's text it does not matter at all what, historically, was primary or urgent for Copernicus", Blumenberg concludes, "but only what was bound up, for Kant, with an appeal to Copernicus as a model" ([4], p. 613).

The effect of this claim becomes still more pronounced when we recall not only the Copernican but also the Kantian context of the enquiry, toward which Blumenberg directs us. As the occasion of Kant's original footnote reminds us, after all, it is *in the very moment* of seeking to postulate some authorizing ground in the empirical work of mere *understanding* (*Verstand*) that Kant finds himself doing something very much like the opposite, grasping for his own legitimation by way of *misunderstanding* instead. The entire edifice of pure reason, in this respect, hangs not only on metaphor, but on something like catachresis—"the practice of adapting the nearest available term to describe something for which no actual term exists", as Quintilian defines it ([9], p. 321). Or to put that in another way, Blumenberg manages to defend Kant from the charge of subjective misunderstanding. But he does so only at the price of founding the entire Kantian enterprise on a far more pervasive, indeed systematic, *objective* misunderstanding that thereby comes to constitute an historical fact in its own right.

Once we have grasped the audacity of Kant's logic, then, we are left with the strangeness of his rhetoric, with the gradual transformation of an analogy into a metaphor, and with the sudden assertion of a philosophy on the basis of that metaphor. Kant presents us with the problematic of understanding in a first gesture—since Hume, at least, a kind of fundamental philosophical problem—but in a second displaces even that, with a deeper problem of *misunderstanding*. In this case, however, misunderstanding, rather than inverting the terms of understanding, seems oddly to buttress and subtend them. Indeed understanding as such turns out to devolve historically on a misunderstanding—or an entire structure of misunderstanding—underneath or coiled within it. As a practical matter, we might say, understanding turns out to be indistinguishable from misunderstanding. Understanding has emerged as a metaphor for misunderstanding itself.

2. Context and Ground

To grasp Blumenberg's method, we need to bracket the classical question of rhetoric as we typically use it, or at least to complicate it slightly. And here, Richards' account of misunderstanding is useful in framing exactly what might be at issue, for Blumenberg, in this self-devouring moment of Kantian *méconnaissance*. For rhetoric as understood, and misunderstood, here devolves not merely onto figurative language, but more precisely (for Richards and for Blumenberg) onto *metaphor*, and as Blumenberg's local language (not to mention the entire structure of his thought) attests, it is really metaphor that is operating in this moment of trans-epochal misrecognition.

Richards' technical account of metaphor is canonical enough that it can be recalled briefly: the delineation of that movement, of both relation and non-relation, between tenor and vehicle, or (in the *gestalt* usage somewhat closer to Blumenberg's own) ground and figure. Less familiar perhaps, though ultimately more important, than this explication of metaphor's form is Richards' account of its extent

and general *function*. In this case, Richards' definition of metaphor is almost interchangeable with—or at least merely a special case of—his definition of words, of linguistic reference as such: "substitutes exerting the powers of what is not there" ([1], p. 32). For Richards, what metaphors do is what words do: they name "contexts" ([1], p. 34); in the larger historical or logical sense, *grounds*. But "context" has a special sense here:

> it is a name for a whole cluster of events that recur together—including the required conditions as well as whatever we may pick out as cause or effect…In these contexts one item—typically a word—takes over the duties of parts which can then be omitted from the recurrence…When this abridgment happens, what the sign or word—the item with these delegated powers—means is the missing parts of the context ([1], p. 34).

Ultimately, then, "what a word means is the missing parts of the contexts from which it draws its delegated efficacy" ([1], p. 35).

To say that in another way, words or metaphors (the same is true of both, for Richards, at different levels of use) operate as figures marking *absent* grounds; vehicles testify to the *absence* of tenors. To decide a meaning is simply to delineate a context and thereby to restore it in some merely provisional way, momentarily determining relations of cause, effect, and so on. But it is also to acknowledge that the context itself has eluded nomination and evaded conceptualization, and there a problem arises. For it turns out that the simple act of reference, insofar as it involves and predicates "the missing parts of the context" also involves a dramatic logic of negation. That is to say, the very fact of a word stipulates the loss of a ground. In saying something, we are also *not* saying something else, and that something else *not said* is the very substance of what we mean to say. A vehicle may select a tenor, but it also negates it, at the very least negates most of its parts, which thereby cease to exert any particular determinate authority or strict meaning at the level of linguistic expression. And if that is true, *understanding* and *misunderstanding* have effectively merged. A misunderstanding, no less than an understanding, summons and selects a new context. But it leaves no good way to distinguish the value of that context against other fields and contexts, except in the functioning of the metaphor itself.

Transposed into another historical key, this is exactly the formal crisis that underlies Blumenberg's account of modernity. As the famous dispute with Carl Schmitt attests, with Schmitt insisting on the vestigial grip of historical substance in order to derogate the claims of a secularized world, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* forces just this question of function: of practical legitimation by repeated trial, ultimately a question of the powers and implications of metaphor and the possibility, in turn, of the negation of grounds by their figures. It is exactly the claim of content or historical substance, of context or ground, on function that turns out to be in question. For Schmitt, a substantive ground cannot be negated [10]. For Blumenberg, it already has been: "It is in fact possible for totally heterogeneous contents to take on identical functions in specific positions in the system of man's interpretation of the world and of himself" ([3], p. 64). It is that claim that authorizes Blumenberg's move to describe an epochal break "not as the *transposition* of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin but rather as the *reoccupation* of answer positions that had become vacant" ([3], p. 65). All of this depends, in its way, on the possibility of reclaiming misunderstanding as understanding; and that possibility depends on the negating power of metaphor.

Grasped in this way, however, metaphor also emerges as an historical problem in its own right, and it is for this reason that we must bracket a more traditional sense of rhetoric as mere figurative embellishment or invention. In a very particular sense, for Blumenberg, it is *as metaphor* that modernity structures its own legitimacy most radically: the withdrawal of an absolute God dissolves the teleological guarantee of context as such, that theologically ordered universe in which humans once maintained an ordained place, however small. "In our tradition's system of the explanation of reality there is a 'position' for this historical subject, a position to which vacancy and occupation refer. The accomplishment and establishment of the reoccupation are rhetorical acts" ([11], p. 451). By this logic, however, modernity's claim to legitimacy itself assumes a different cast. As the possibility of teleological order recedes, as theory succeeds philosophy, it is metaphor that permits human thought to proceed hypothetically, exercising a power of action unsponsored by any authority beyond itself. "Man comprehends himself only by way of what he is not. It is not only his situation that is potentially metaphorical; his constitution itself already is" ([11], p. 456). But to just this degree, the legitimacy of the modern age entails an immediate, and potentially determinate, contradiction. By modernity's historical logic, human self-assertion retains the power to convert misunderstanding to understanding and in so doing to secure its own functional truth, metaphorically imposing anthropology as the context and ground of a displaced theology. The formal logic through which such a history unfolds, however, in its retroactive capacity to negate the grounds of a prior legitimacy, also entails the negating power of metaphor as such, in effect postulating the inevitable emergence of some future ground, presently unformed but destined at some later time to project its own as yet unknown but determinate force. Man's capacity to reoccupy the position of a hidden God now presupposes the ultimate displacement of man himself.

3. Metaphorics

Blumenberg's account of the metaphorical encounter staged between Copernicus and Kant does not in fact originate in *The Genesis of the Copernican World*. Already, the two stand as iconic thresholds at either end of "the trial of theoretical curiosity" that forms the basic narrative of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. But strangely enough, they approach most nearly, in that book, not when Blumenberg discusses Kant, but rather when he turns to Ludwig Feuerbach, whose description of the "knowledge-drive" in which anthropological "self-assertion" culminates—*Neuzeit*'s ultimate displacement of God by man—summons Copernicus as its emblem ([3], p. 445). For Feuerbach, *curiositas* has now emerged as the explicitly definitive anthropological principle, ready to forget even that *Deus Absconditus* whose disappearance into a voluntarist theology first produced a human-scaled world in the guise of nominalism. But this dialectic—a God recoiling into pure obscurity, a humanity left to confront mere particulars in its wake—also generates two other effects. The first is a *temporalization* of knowledge as such, already glimpsed in the problematic gap between epochs that gives rise to a crisis of legitimation. Implicitly, temporality already lurks in the image of Copernicus' historical non-self-identity, his inability to see confirmed in sense what he knows in theory. The result of Copernicus' original hypothetical wager is that knowledge comes to exceed itself categorically, cracks its own foundations and thereby begins to imply more than it strictly says. It is thus cast forward in time, awaiting the methodological reoccupation of a Kant or a Feuerbach, some later agent of curiosity

able to describe and reground the world that Copernicus himself can never occupy. More generally, this temporalization forms Blumenberg's implicit answer to the reactionary charge of modernity's secularization of eschatological thinking (made not only by Schmitt but also by Karl Löwith); more locally, it offers the effective defense of Kant already seen. Kant himself has not misunderstood. It is rather that curiosity's immersion in time essentially guarantees misunderstanding as the context of *curiositas* is remade.

But that effect of temporalization produces the second large effect Blumenberg describes, unfolding in this case beyond Kant or Feuerbach to Freud. Now, with *curiositas* fully realized in the exercise of human self-assertion, he argues, we witness "the diffusion of the term to other realms, ultimately to any realm whatever, a process in which consciousness of the daring of such employment—which after all was the impression that the linguistic transfer was originally intended to convey—quickly disappears" ([3], p. 438). In other words, curiosity itself has become metaphorical, has been constituted in a linguistic transfer, and has thus become portable, available to underwrite any newly emergent domain of anthropological inquiry. A few pages later, Blumenberg draws the consequence:

> At bottom the interest in history is essentially metaphorical, or, more precisely, directed at making accessible what is still metaphorical. The model is theology as the historical form of a metaphorical, and therefore still withheld, anthropology—the metaphor of an anthropology that evidently was able neither to express itself nor to operate as such, that needed projection into a foreign medium, into the exaggerated dimensions of transcendence, in order to articulate itself. ([3], pp. 440–41).

In formal terms at least, this is the conceptual core of Blumenberg's system. It accordingly restates a point first made a few years earlier, in his first significant published work, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (1960). There, recalling the Cartesian dream of a perfectly systematic and referential philosophical vocabulary, in which philosophical signs would transparently render concepts, without surplus or loss (a kind of early modern *Begriffgeschichte*), Blumenberg had posed the incipiently vestigial problem of figurative language:

> To this ideal of full objectification would correspond the perfection of a terminology designed to capture the presence and precision of the matter at hand in well-defined concepts. In its terminal state, philosophical language would be purely and strictly "conceptual": everything *can* be defined, therefore everything *must* be defined; there is no longer anything logically "provisional"…From this vantage point, all forms and elements of *figurative* speech, in the broadest sense of the term, prove to have been makeshifts destined to be superseded by logic. ([12], pp. 1–2).

For Blumenberg, this desire for transparency defines the enterprise of philosophy itself, whether in the form of high scholastic reason, of Cartesian method, of analytic precision, or of a conventional logic of legitimacy of the Schmittian sort. But it is what is abandoned in the process—the two things forsworn in this philosophical fantasy—that proves most important. The first is of course metaphor as such: either the "'transferred' speech" ([12], p. 2) that bridges categorical cracks and crevices in ordinary thought or what Blumenberg terms "absolute metaphor", those *"foundational elements* of philosophical language" ([12], p. 3) that remain irreducible to philosophical discourse itself, the

metaphysical remnants of an originary catachresis. The other, for Blumenberg, is nothing less than history itself, for metaphors (he insists) have a history that concepts necessarily lack or foreclose; they can in fact only be conceived *as* the substance of the fully historical, as the archaeological record of meaning-effects not fully given, divulged, or exhausted by the concept in its more rigorous guise, "for the historical transformation of a metaphor brings to light the metakinetics of the historical horizons of meaning and ways of seeing within which concepts undergo their modifications" ([12], p. 5). Metaphors are, we might say, the revenge upon philosophy taken by contexts.

This attention to metaphor not only as history's visible and legible evidence but also as its essential substance underlies all of Blumenberg's work, but in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, it also defines both an historiographical method and an historical claim, reminding us that "the image not only represents the original but can also conceal it" ([3], p. 72). Impelled by the emergence of a curiosity no longer strictly subordinated to the binding teleological force of scholastic realism, modernity carves out a mode of procedure that can only be characterized, in Cartesian or analytical terms, as *less* than philosophical, capable of working and moving beneath the rarefied stratum of the concept, across the vast field that we can, for lack of better terms, call science, theoretical curiosity, human self-assertion, and so on. In so doing, modernity doesn't invent metaphor. As Blumenberg's treatment of "absolute metaphor" insists, metaphor is always there, as an historical matter, or even (we might say) *as historical matter*. But it does, as we have seen, *reclaim* metaphor and in the process remake it, at exactly this moment when a governing term—*curiositas*—detaches into portability, not as a concept but rather as a floating vehicle or figure. We might even say that it secularizes or unbinds a previously merely rhetorical notion as something entirely different, defined precisely by its capacity to generate new grounds in the interest of self-legitimation.

What we should notice, then, is the way in which Blumenberg has implicitly understood metaphor in this instance. Classically, of course, metaphor generates a figure to illuminate a ground, a ground thereby reiterated and underscored even when displaced in appearance. Metaphor thus produces a surplus of referentiality, a kind of literary residue, even if the surplus generated is in effect more of the same, a reiteration and thus an expansion of its original ground. That in turn distinguishes metaphor from the concept as Blumenberg understands it, which abstracts a particular and given ground, strictly regulating linguistic reference in a relation of logical or propositional equality.

But metaphor as modernity has begun to produce it now forces a figure onto two grounds (or more) at once. It is still the case that metaphor produces a surplus of reference. We can no longer assume, however, that the ground over which it expands is that from which it originated. To the contrary, the very diffusion of possible grounds generated in the wake of voluntarism's withdrawn teleology all but ensures that any given figure will begin to intend some new ground that will be altered, simultaneously de- and re-legitimized in its turn. Metaphor therefore begins to pose an impossible math, a kind of indefinitely additive logic of its own, designed precisely to defer any regulative statement of equality. But it also inverts a classical sense of linguistic order: figures or vehicles are now singular rather than multiple, while grounds or tenors have been pressed into a serial or conjunctive relation, through which any given one both can and will displace other grounds or tenors, only to be displaced in its turn. If that is so, then our traditional sense of rhetoric, or indeed of metaphor as such, has changed. But so has our relation to both language and thought. Most obviously, metaphor is no longer something that we make; it is rather something that we confront as an historical given. Historical

inquiry now presupposes this priority: figures are in fact the data with which we are forced to work. No longer does ground precede figure. Henceforth, figure will precede ground; and almost inevitably, the ground that generated the figure in the first place will find itself displaced not just in language but in its grounding authority as well.

This, then, is the apparently impossible torsion of Blumenberg's metaphorology. On one side, it is a purely formal effect, an extralogical logic, and it thus stands outside of history proper, while also rendering history as a formal possibility. But on the other, this equation can be reversed, for metaphor itself—at least in the strong sense that Blumenberg gives it here, of a legitimating instrument—has come into being with modernity, precisely insofar as it remains bound to the epochal labor of which modernity constitutes the (metaphorical) evidence. Metaphor's fundamental sense has therefore changed. No longer a merely derivative device of rhetoric, a mode of secondary comparison, it has come to name the very way in which one "realm"—one discourse, one field, one context—insinuates its way into another, seizes it, always in response to some conceptual gap or catachresis in the original domain, which now requires a misunderstanding to authorize an understanding.

Metaphor has accordingly begun to exert something like the force of a law, an ordering or naming principle that remains formally and fundamentally unruly, capable at any moment of testing a concept *by pushing it to its logical limit* and then beyond that limit, testing as an incipient universal what began as (and in some sense formally remains) a mere particular. It is perhaps no accident, then, that this account takes us ultimately to Freud. For it is Freud, by way of the *Traumdeutung*, who realizes this implication most fully: the ground of the metaphor lies always in the dream-thought, in the censored thing that categorically cannot be restored and thus marks the terrain of the unconscious, leaving interpretation or theory or indeed any appearance taken for reality to sort the disfigurations that have condensed in its place. Far from belonging to man, Feuerbach's knowledge-drive produces anthropology as one more ground to be dissolved, as a misunderstanding that has become normative only so long as it awaits its next context. Metaphor's essential historicity, then, must include also the thought of a future negation, of a dislocation of the anthropological itself.

Blumenberg's return to this problem, offered two decades later, is perhaps still more provocative. Folding the narrower problem of metaphorics into the general field of what he terms nonconceptuality, he explains, recalling images from Quintilian and Montaigne, that "[m]etaphor captures what is not present in the qualities of a meadow when viewed objectively but is also not the subjective and phantastic addition made by an observer" ([13], pp. 83–84). Lurking in that description is something like a phenomenology of the historical as such: a set of causal qualities reducible neither to scientific description nor to sensuous perception but nonetheless real in their effects. The only element missing from the description is that temporality adduced above in the trial of curiosity. But here too, Blumenberg insists, metaphor presupposes the decay and loss of a given context and the corollary reference to another context or ground that displaces it: "It is only under the need to repair an imperiled consistency that the element that is first destructive *becomes* a metaphor" ([13], p. 83). "The process of cognition", he reminds us, "entails losses" ([13], p. 87). But taken as the definitive element or crux of the larger problem of the nonconceptual, metaphor now assumes another crucial aspect as well, not only fusing a figure and a ground, but also registering a second difference, between elements of a ground that remain available to the intention of the life-world and those that have shriveled, decayed, or gone missing. "Nonconceptuality", Blumenberg insists, "wants more than the 'form' of

processes or states; it wants their 'gestalt'" ([13], pp. 96–97), a gestalt that requires the simultaneous manifestation of what cognition retains and what it has lost.

It is here that one may discern most fully the aspect of negation lurking deep in Blumenberg's method, even though it is rarely named as such, a negation of a peculiar sort. Less than conceptually determinate in the full Hegelian sense, inhering instead within the elements of the nonconceptual, this negation retains a certain determinacy nonetheless, an insistence on reference that withdraws it from the range of merely reflective judgment and imbues it with the force of a potentially legitimate, even if non-veridical, claim. What Blumenberg terms the nonconceptual, that is, is not quite reducible to the *anti*-conceptual or the merely reflective, in the Kantian sense. Although not strictly logical, it is also not merely aesthetic, as if we required three terms rather than two, some order of para-concept that might allow us to distinguish this metaphorics from an older notion of rhetoric (or aesthetics), while also distinguishing this particular and deferred mode of metaphorical determinacy from the claims of conceptuality as such.

I want to suggest that we might find the rudiments of such an arrangement—with three terms rather than two—in an unexpected place. One of the questions that haunted late neo-Kantian thought around the turn of the last century was the need, left unmet by Kant himself, to secure a possibility of historical reason—not a philosophy of history, but rather a critical philosophy that might demarcate a properly historical concept. Distinct from the larger enterprises of both *Historismus* and a pure philosophy of history (though it shares the moment of each), the possibility of such an historical reason is a more strictly methodological problematic, an attempt to define the logical and formal boundary between the concept in its proper and fully determinate mode—as a tool of scientific abstraction determinately related to Nature—and the shape of an entirely different kind of conceptual instrument, contoured to the concrete, the existent. In the terms offered by Heinrich Rickert, who develops this argument most extensively, the former marks "a science of concepts," the latter "a science of reality" [14]. The practical difference between these two sciences lies in the meaning of conceptuality as such: where a science of concepts abstracts, a science of reality generates an *historical* concept instead, thickening and expanding the field of what Rickert terms the "individual." It concretizes, particularizes, and ultimately (in Rickert's system at least) opens on to an entire totalizing field of culture. For Rickert, then—unlike his contemporaries Dilthey and Windelbrand, for example—there is no simple meaningful distinction in the objects of these sciences (or at least no difference that divides the historical from the purely natural sciences), but rather a much larger difference of method between pure and historical reason as *logical* operations.

In the strictly logical terms that Rickert seeks to produce, it is less than clear that these terms will ultimately bear the weight needed, not least because this version of the historical concept lacks the capacity for abstraction that defines its scientific counterpart and thus seems always on the verge of succumbing to its own referential density, to the mass of material that the historian must approach as an originally undifferentiated field. But in the context of Blumenberg's metaphorology, it is just this kind of referential density that is persistently at issue: a concrete phenomenological expansiveness and multiplication of reference that no longer depend on the operation of simple abstraction but rather on the historical concept's capacity to achieve generality simply by adding contexts to which it meaningfully refers. On one side, then, we are confronted with a metaphor that is no longer merely rhetorical, no longer merely a metaphor. On the other, we confront a concept that is not strictly a

concept, which now inclines toward a relation and effect of concretion rather than abstraction. But in Blumenberg's terms, it is just this double movement of detachment or cancellation that the thought of the historical as such must maintain.

Or to phrase the hypothesis differently, for Blumenberg both the metaphor and the logical concept are *themselves* sites that the modern age has reoccupied, forced into historical movement, and ultimately regrounded. Metaphorology accordingly emerges in a double movement of formal resistance. On one side, it refuses "a substantialistic ontology of history" ([3], p. 113), expressed (Blumenberg suggests) not only in variations on a model of secularization, but also in the grand continuities of something like Curtius' topos research. Here, the demand for conceptual identity "always involves a renunciation of possible knowledge" ([3], p. 113) by enforcing metaphor's return to its original but vacated ground, refusing the emergence of new contexts. But metaphorology equally refuses the aestheticist fantasy that would claim the power of reoccupation for itself, submitting historical grounds to some free play of faculties and thereby abstracting them completely into functions of the subjective present. Metaphors retain the concept's potentially determinate force, but detach that force from either precedent or pure reason. There is something paradoxical in Blumenberg's account, to the degree that a kind of sober conceptualism (in the very different strains of Schmitt or Curtius) effectively reproduces the nostalgic model of classical rhetoric, while the idealizing romanticism of Jean Paul or Rousseau (to recall two of Blumenberg's prime examples) aspires formally to the scientific concept's pure abstraction. But the central point emerges no less forcefully. History has not only emerged as the domain of metaphor, that field of logical remnants that Blumenberg's earliest work imagined. It has now been *constituted* on the grounds of metaphor, on the grounds of shifting grounds.

Read in this way, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* stands as the attempt to elaborate the logical domain of the historical concept as such, of a metaphorics no longer purely subordinated to rhetoric or dialectic. But with this emergence of a newly paraconceptual mode, we might also attempt to define metaphor one more time, and more precisely now, as history's inevitable abandonment of any dream of the perfect system of value: its semi-detachment from both the logical and the rhetorical and its subsequent reattachment to some context not yet fully established. The paradox that follows captures the definitive operation of Blumenberg's method. For it is the gradual reckoning with the limitations and failures of metaphor in its classical rhetorical sense—the attempt to extract from it the teleological force of the concept—that produces the sequence of theological problems that *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* narrates: the Augustinian grappling with the logic of Gnosticism in a desperate bid to preserve the perfection of God, but also the later confrontation with the latent contradictions of Aristotelian teleology, the conundrum of the *Deus Absconditus* who must, to remain unconstrained by his own creation, be similarly exempted from any conceptual claim emerging in the attempt to name it. Once reclaimed and reimagined as and by modernity, however, such a metaphorology has also shrugged off its consignment to mere misunderstanding. If misunderstanding can offer a legitimating ground, a mode of understanding as well as error—if misunderstanding is no longer strictly opposed to understanding as such—then the practice of metaphorology has itself been regrounded from the context of rhetoric to that of poetics.

4. Reoccupation as Metalepsis

From the moment of its first identification by Aristotle, Paul Ricoeur observes, metaphor has harbored and uneasily conjoined two distinctive contexts or intentions of its own. As a vehicle of rhetoric, it operates socially, a tool of persuasion or consensus. As an instrument of poetics, however, metaphor undertakes a referential function, extending the speculative work of mimesis across domains. If it intends the oratorical present in one aspect, then, undertaking the work of supplication or suasion, it also intends a present yet to be summoned into historical existence, deferring the work of reference to a context that will grant it referential force only belatedly. Metaphor is, therefore, in Richards' sense, already metaphorical, splayed not only across different legitimating claims but also across different modes of legitimacy: it "has a foot in each domain," Ricoeur insists. "Metaphor will therefore have a unique *structure* but two *functions*: a rhetorical and a poetic function" ([15], p. 12).

I have suggested already that Blumenberg's anthropology originates in rhetoric's power of misunderstanding. The translation of misunderstanding into understanding, however, and the reclamation of a proper historical concept require that we misunderstand rhetoric as well, in the mode of a poetics, with the capacity to *refer* to a context that metaphor also *constructs*. So understood, metaphor cannot remain a singular figure, an isolated exchange between figure and ground, constrained in the moment of its own formation. To the contrary, metaphor's historical or futural aspect commits an originating linguistic transfer to an indefinite chain or series of potential substitutions, to the continual and epochal dislocation of new contexts. As its conjunctive force begins to exceed any single figurative operation, we are confronted with something larger and ultimately systematic, a mechanism of displacement and re-grounding that can only keep displacing and re-grounding. To this degree, Blumenberg's metaphorics assumes some of the qualities of the metonymic, forming a chain of negations that is, in principle, theoretically endless. Metaphorics postulates new grounds, and in the inevitability of its doing so, I want to suggest, it is transformed again, now into something like metalepsis, a mode of historical narration predicated on the expectation of its own subsequent re-narration, its negation and posterior conversion into something else.

I have alluded to the strange coupling of Kant and Nietzsche across Blumenberg's thought: the first the figure who triumphs by misunderstanding understanding, the second his inverse, who understands misunderstanding and in so doing finally detaches content or substance from form or function, in the mode of genealogy. Blumenberg's own project is a genealogy, of course, though in the figure of reoccupation, I have suggested, it admits a measure of determinacy, by way of metaphor's historicizing force, that Nietzsche himself would have regarded with suspicion. I have suggested too that for Blumenberg the modern age re-invents metaphor. The re-overcoming of Gnosticism and the voluntarist withdrawal of God effectively unbind its previously merely rhetorical power, multiplying the referential grounds available to language and thought in the process. In the near term (or at least in the intervening history since the nominalist turn, *Neuzeit* as such), the result lies in human self-assertion, in the emergence of theoretical curiosity as science, as anthropology, as a "knowledge-drive." But this account implies a subtle displacement of historical agency. Nominalism's gift to modernity lies in the fact that it relieves humans of conceptual agency in order to restrict pure teleological unity to God himself. But if that is so, then self-assertion—indeed anthropology as such—is an accidental by-product. It is simply the product of a very powerful metaphor.

We have already seen, however, that under Blumenberg's formal logic metaphors work in reverse: grounds follow figures, rather than the other way around. That suggests, in turn, that an ongoing historical redescription of the modern age is not only possible; it is in fact all but necessary, not only in the past, with the first overcoming of Gnosticism or the second, but also in the future—whether that entails a third overcoming of Gnosticism or merely an overcoming of its prior overcomings. Anthropology will ultimately be defined not by what it asserts, but rather by that which will assert itself in its turn, some time in the future, reoccupying the position that theoretical curiosity has (for now) arrogated to itself. Blumenberg's cryptic Nietzscheanism captures some of this lurking implication, as do his regular glances forward to Freud, the figure who practically concretizes Nietzsche's implication most fully. Taken together, Nietzsche and Freud seem to suggest not the achievement of self-assertion, but rather the moment at which even self-assertion is revealed as metaphorical, at which the figure of assertion is detached from the ground of a reflexive "self" and referred instead to some emergent and alien ground that compels the labor of interpretation in a new context. We are brought to the point, then, of imagining a mode of assertion that entails no particular "self" at all, that perhaps even proceeds by way of the displacement of that self into some alien context (and it is certainly possible to understand the Freudian unconscious in just this way). What I want to suggest, then, is the presence of a formative or enabling contradiction in Blumenberg's notion of legitimacy. A large part of the brilliance of the argument against secularization lies in its ability to reclaim legitimacy itself as a function of metaphor. But it can only follow that, in the same way that the positions reoccupied by the modern age do not belong in some proprietary way to theology, the subsequent productions of theory and curiosity do not strictly belong to anthropology. Or at least they cannot do so logically. Having arrived by metaphor, they can depart in the same way.

What is to be made, then, of modernity's humanism? To a large degree, the compelling force of Blumenberg's model lies in its need to resist the anti-humanist critique implicit in the many versions of a secularization thesis, the reduction of anthropology itself to bad faith. And in this, he largely succeeds. But that success only secures, by way of metaphor, the absence of humanism's bad faith. It cannot ascertain the persistence of humanism as such, but only a "knowledge-drive" defined by its poetic restlessness. In the process of detaching anthropology from theology, humanism sacrifices any teleological claim on the world. It is characteristic of such a humanism, then, that it will never be able to account for itself *except* by metaphor. But it is characteristic of Blumenberg's metaphorics that it will always discover new and alien grounds; that it will end in a logic of metalepsis through which an assertion even of self turns out to have originated elsewhere.

Metalepsis, in the sense meant here, thus indicates something like the metonymization of metaphor, its multiplication and slide across contexts, ultimately across a chain of contexts. The term owes most of its currency to Genette's narratology, of course, where it distinguishes the competing authorities of differentiated narrative planes ([16], pp. 234–37). But in this context it might also suggest something else, closer to Quintilian's sense of "a transition from one trope to another" ([9], p. 323): a figuration that displaces metaphor by intensifying its logic. Blumenberg's reading of the "knowledge-drive" through which *curiositas* was reclaimed as anthropology's definitive mark divulges the moment of metalepsis, man's own constitution across a metaphorical chain. In formal terms, however, this presents a paradox, threatening to impose a fundamentally non-metaphorical (even teleological) stamp

on anthropology as such, substantial or conceptual rather than purely functional. It is at this moment, it seems, that Blumenberg's modernity attempts to arrest the work of metaphor.

But can modernity actually stop being metaphorical? Can it suddenly resist metalepsis without reconstituting the very model of legitimacy it first forswore? The fact that Feuerbach's "knowledge-drive" is succeeded by Freud's suggests that, even for Blumenberg, it cannot. But within that question, a far more potent one is waiting, one that might be framed in the Freudian notion of *Ananke* or necessity. The thing that metaphor would seem to render necessary, under Blumenberg's logic, is precisely the epochal quality of modernity itself, its availability to the reoccupation of some position it has produced by an alien logic yet unknown. This logic would not be (in any meaningful sense) merely postmodern, for that would simply reproduce the logic of secularization in another guise (anthropology now completing its mimicry of theology by reproaching and naming that which succeeds it). It would simply be different: a metalepsis that retroactively imposes its own epochal context in place of our own, by way of a figure that we did not understand in the first place, but which bore within it some yet unglimpsed determinate force. It is in this sense that modernity's metaphorics confronts us with a poetic problem, confronts us indeed as a poetics, standing as the domain of figures that still await their grounds.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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