

## Paul de Man's Views on Signification with Respect to his Concepts of Misreading, Aphoria and Allegory

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**Abstract.** Structuralists explore signification with respect to underlying structural patterns (langue) and sees it as stable, finite and fixed. Poststructuralists reject the structuralist's notion of fixity and absolutism of meaning. They explored the metaphorical, ideological, contextual and intertextual aspects of language which opens up signification process for multiplicity and polysemy. Paul de Man belongs to the Yale School of Deconstructionists. He explored the aphoric nature of language due to the appendage of figurative and ideological values on the underlying true values of language. The present paper attempts to explore Paul de Man's views on allegoric and aphoric nature of language that creates the scope of misreading.

**Keywords :** Deconstruction; signification; allegory; misreading; aphoria.

The Yale School of Deconstructionists Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom contributed significantly to the deconstructive analysis of literary texts in 1970s. De Man regards language as a collection of "pure signifiers". Language consists of meaningless marks and symbols. The pure signs are formal, mechanical and devoid of any meaning in themselves. They do not have the potential to integrate the subject and the object. The pure signs indicate the separateness of meaning from sign. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn write about De Man's views on signs, "As a collection of "Pure signifiers" in themselves "devoid of meaning and function," language is primarily a meaningless structure to which meanings are secondary (as in De Man's view illegitimately added)" (734). The paper explores Paul de Man's views on allegoric and aphoric nature of language that creates the scope of misreading.

Paul de Man focused on language and does not make a distinction between literary and non-literary language. The literary is an addition or an appendage to language. It is the addition or appendage to language that creates uncertainty and conflicts in language otherwise language consists of 'pure signifier' devoid of any inherent meaning. To substantiate his point De Man selected critical writings about literary language which he sees as an affixation to language. Rather than choosing writings from subjects like history, philosophy and sociology, De Man chose critical writings about literature as critical writings substantially provide evidences about uncertainties and conflicts. Hence what is generally regarded as literary is not different from non-literary but is an addition to the pure signifier. De man advocates two fold strategy of combining a piece of writing – first to argue about and identify the literary additions to language and second to dismantle the affixed material. De Man believes that appended ideologies, philosophy, history etc. imposed on the

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true values of language or pure signifiers are interpreted and the true values of language are ignored. These types of interpretation in which the appended literary language and imposed ideologies, philosophy or metaphysics are regarded as the interpretation of language are actually delusion and deception. De man writes:

The fallacy of the belief that, in the language of poetry, sign and meaning can coincide, or at least be related to each other in the free and harmonious balance that we call beauty, is said to be a specifically romantic delusion. The unity of appearance (sign) and idea (meaning) – to use the terminology that one finds indeed among the theoreticians of romanticism when they speak of *Schein* and *Idee* – is said to be a romantic myth embodied in the recurrent topos of the “Beautiful soul” (Criticism and Crisis, 13)

According to Paul de Man a critical reading should take into account the conflict between the underlined true values of language and the appended or imposed ideological values. Reading becomes a highly complex process as the ideological values are grafted on the underline true values which are not overtly available for interpretation. Then the language of literature is not a unified language. It is a language of conflict.

Paul de Man regards language as figurative that expresses one thing and means another. Tropes (figures of speech) reject the literal or referential meaning and open the possibility of multiple meanings. Paul de Man regards every reading as misreading as reading is not confined to literal meaning but tropes always interfere between a literary and critical text. The tropes and the metaphorical meaning are imposed on the literal meaning. Like literary language, all language – economics, law, philosophy, political science etc. depend on the metaphors. Polysemy and ambiguity caused by the figurative language is widely found in literature. When a text is read, soon its literal and rational meaning is taken over by the metaphorical meaning. Critical writing no longer remains merely a paraphrase or description of the literary text but a trope comes between literary and critical reading and affects the process of signification and results in misunderstanding. De man’s method of deconstructive reading of a text is to explore undecidability rather than privileging one item of the binary opposition (pair). The undecidability or simultaneous acceptance and their rejection of stances taken by writers is called *aphoria*. The effort is made to avoid any final signification by questioning or doubting the visible meaning by contradicting it. The effort is done not to resolve the issue by privileging one choice over the other but to create an impasse. Language in such a situation becomes “Codes of *Aphoria*”. According to Paul de Man ‘*aphoria*’ is more potently present in the language of literature than in philosophy, history and other subjects. De Man writes in this regard :

The fundamental movement of the literary mind espouses the pattern of a demystifying consciousness; literature finally comes into its own and becomes authentic when it discovers that the exalted state it claimed for its language is a myth. The function of the critic then naturally becomes co-extensive with the intent at demystification that is more or less consciously present in the mind of the author (14).

Language of literature structurally is aphoric. It is characterized by self-demystification and self-deconstruction. What is hidden or silent in a text comes to the surface in the form of reading by contradicting the visible meaning through questioning. The reader comes to the state of undecidability when he is not able to reach a final solution by privileging either the visible or the other hidden meaning. This is the moment of aporia or impasse of undecidability when neither the visible (conscious) nor the silent (unconscious) is privileged and the issue remains unresolved. Paul de Man equated “actual history” with the “literal” and regards it as a production of meaning which is distinguished from the trope or the figurative meaning of a text. The figurative meaning is superimposed or appended to the pure signs and the conflict between the two remains an endless exercise in demystifying and deconstructing language.

History provides the real value of language. It provides us the criterion of the production of meaning which helps us in distinguishing between the literal meaning and the figurative meaning. Language of literature contains the double layers of meaning – the underlying real values of language and overlaid ideological values. The literary critics and the theorists confine their arguments to the core knowledge based on philosophy or an ideology. They ignore the real nature of language. According to Paul de Man the underlying real values of language are in conflict with the overlaid ideological values which have been mystified. Since the true values are not directly available for reading and are hidden under the overlaid philosophical and ideological values, the appended imposed values are interpreted. Such a model that ignores the interpretation of the underlying true values of language and concentrates only on the ideological values affixed at the surface has been wrongly regarded as the interpretation of language. Such a language is not harmonious and is the language of conflict. This state is the state of ‘aporia’. Language from this point of view is the “Codes of Aporia” and it is fundamentally self-demystifying in its nature and structure. Similarly Paul de Man draws attention towards falsely preferring symbol over the allegory in the interpretation of the meaning of the language. Symbols got preference over allegory by the earlier philosophic traditions in which symbols have been equated with beauty and allegory with ugliness. De Man opines that due to wretched state of man, he took fancy for symbol. This is self-deception. Language is naturally allegorical marked by the separation of the subject and the object. Language is not unification but

rather cleavage and separation. Hence for the true signification of language, this state of preferring symbol over allegory needs to be deconstructed by reversing the preferences from symbol to allegory.

Paul de Man's book *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (1979) acquaints us with his concept of allegory, reading and figural language. Through the discussion of these concepts, we come to know about De Man's strategy of deconstruction. De Man regards all language as figural. According to him, "The figurative structure is not one linguistic mode among others but it characterizes language as such" (*Allegories of Reading*, 105). If all language is figural like literary language, then philosophy also uses the same language and hence it is also figural. Philosophy should, therefore, be read on the rhetorical model of literature. For example the word 'drug' is not used in the sense of a thing like aspirin or insulin but it provides semantic overtone by moral and political considerations (responsibility, society, the body etc.). There are philosophical implications in which the word 'drug' is used as a metonym. Earlier philosophy was regarded as a subject bearing a distinctive affinity with truth and literature as its opposite form that due to figurative language has affinity with fiction or non-truth. De Man regards both philosophy and literature characterised by the use of tropes and hence are similar. However, literary texts due to rich presence of rhetorical and figurative elements deconstruct themselves. Paul de Man regards all the narratives as allegorical as in the interpretation of a narrative the link between the word (signifier) and the concept or object (signified) is broken and a gap is created to make it mean altogether different from what it originally (literally) signifies. De Man gave the example of 'dove' that originally refers to dove as a bird but allegorically its original meaning has been entirely transformed figuratively to mean it a bird of peace. De Man regards allegory a general characteristic of all languages as all the languages are distinctively figurative or tropological. The interpretation of the narrative takes us to the meaning that is altogether different from its literal meaning. De Man calls it misreading. According to Martin McQuillan,

Meaning relies on misreading. If there were a simple and transparent relation between what I said and what you understood me to say then there would be no need for interpretation, no possibility of multiple meanings in a text, and only one authoritative centre (me) producing a single, stable meaning. We know that this is not the case and that meaning is always plural... Rather, if all language is figural it lends itself structurally (or by necessity) to misreading and this misreading is a basic condition of producing meaning at all (35).

Figural language, according to Paul de Man, leads to more than one interpretation. De Man calls it misreading. Misreading is the basic condition of producing more than one meaning. A narrative is allegorical. By referring to wholly a different signifier than originally with which it is associated, as we have seen in the afore mentioned example of dove, meaning is deferred and state of misreading is created. Every text is figural and itself initiates the process of deconstructing its literariness or figurativity. This process of deconstructing a text or a narrative once begins opens up a text for readings and rereadings. Each reading becomes a misreading to reread a text. Hence misreading contributes to the production of polysemy in a text. Referring to De Man's reading of Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, Martin McQuillan says that "all texts presuppose the possibility of their own reading (in terms of a single and fixed meaning) but demonstrate the impossibility of such a reading"(40). De Man regards fictional use of language as a distinctive characteristic of meaning. The fictional use of language creates a chasm between the signifier and the signified. A signifier loses a direct relation with the signified. What is said is not understood in its original sense but it is misunderstood. This state of misunderstanding or misreading creates the state of undecidability where it becomes impossible to decide what is really actual and what is fictional. This is the state of aphoria. According to Martin McQuillan, "An aphoria is a rhetorical figure of doubt in which the conditions of possibility of an event or concept are, paradoxically, its own conditions of impossibility resulting in an interpretative impasse or moment of undecidability" (87).

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