Review of “Heidegger and Derrida on Philosophy and Metaphor: Imperfect Thought”

Philip M. Adamek
State University of New York at Buffalo
It is one thing, and perhaps fashionable, to announce “disquiet” within the halls of philosophy; it is another to do so in writing that neither dispels the disquiet out-of-hand nor adopts skepticism, but, rather, meticulously lays out the conditions in which the disquiet is said to occur and offers a critical and constructive assessment thereof. Giuseppe Stellardi’s *Heidegger and Derrida on Philosophy and Metaphor* has the merit of belonging to the latter of these two types of gestures. Given the complexity and at times divisive heritage of the figures and issues which it confronts, it has the added merit of being both clear and capacious in its exposition. Aiding this clarity are numerous features of Stellardi’s book: Stellardi writes in an analytical style that seems tailored for pedagogy; the book contains a lengthy and systematic table of contents as well as 16 diagrams that illustrate various relations discussed throughout the work; and the English translation (of Stellardi’s originally French-language doctoral dissertation) is fluid.

Before addressing the substance of Stellardi’s work, I note that its author, a lecturer in contemporary Italian fiction at St. Hugh’s College, Oxford University, who has also written articles on Dossi, Tarchetti, Svevo, Gadda, Moravia, and Eco, nowhere indulges in his knowledge of Italian letters. Suffice it to say that Stellardi has filled his basket high enough in the present work to have no room for dallying in his other fields of competence. Indeed, Stellardi’s title might at first seem to condemn itself, by means of a conjunction of two massive or possibly disparate notions (philosophy and metaphor)—in addition to the two named figures—to elucidating neither on its own terms or to subordinating one notion lopsidedly to the other; this impression, however, is countered in the opening lines of the author’s Introduction, wherein Stellardi takes full account of the hazards of his conjunctive enterprise, and firmly laid to rest in the approximately 250 pages of text that follow. It can be said, though, that with no apparent sacrifice in the rigor or balance of Stellardi’s reflections on metaphor, both the argumentation and the structure of the book suggest that Stellardi takes up the question of metaphor as a privileged point of access to defining philosophy, and not vice versa. In a word, Stellardi argues that philosophy needs metaphor. (This accent on philosophy is one important way in which Stellardi’s writing on metaphor differs from that of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, which, it may surprise some readers to learn, Stellardi does not discuss or even reference.)

Stellardi argues for the necessity of his project by first tracing in his Introduction a brief history of metaphor’s exclusion by philosophy. According to this history, Plato marks the beginning of philosophy’s resolute disparagement and exclusion of metaphor. (Then again, even the lines that Aristotle contributes to metaphor, Stellardi notes, however seminal they have been outside of philosophy, are scant.) Since Plato, philosophy has always opposed metaphor, image, and rhetoric with foundational ideas of system, concept, and rationality. The former have traditionally been treated by philosophy as being merely supplementary or, worse, parasitic, dangerous, and essentially non-philosophical. A decisive change in philosophy’s attitudes towards metaphor occurs both in the writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger and, more generally, in the emergence of structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction. In these different currents of thought (which, in his final chapter, Stellardi takes some pains to demarcate from one another), the question is variously raised as to whether metaphor in fact concerns or inhabits philosophy necessarily, even to the point where—here enters the disquiet—it puts to question philosophy’s very identity. Stellardi’s contention is that, in entertaining this troubling question, most philosophers (including Heidegger) have limited themselves to “a notion of metaphor (or image) that is relatively narrow, limited to textual events immediately recognizable, on the basis of a
consciously or unconsciously accepted definition, as metaphoric” (p.30). Thus, in chapter one, Stellardi, basing himself on a few allusions to contemporary theories of metaphor and, decisively, on Derrida, develops his own, more expansive definition of metaphor. Readers of Derrida will recognize that the definition of metaphor that Stellardi elaborates in his first chapter owes much to Derrida’s thought concerning the “trait.” This can be seen in the following lines, in which Stellardi’s chosen theme of “imperfect thought” or “incompleteness” also resonates:

The analogical trait is not representable; without the analogical trait, however, there is no metaphor, since metaphoric representations would make no sense. The analogical trait is neither a primum nor a source; it is never natural (original), always derived not from representation, which it always precedes, but from the previous “disposition” of the world as we perceive and interpret it. This disposition regularly eludes any possibility of exhaustive analysis; it includes the trace of all signifying events having taken place and having been recorded, and in particular (in the perspective of this work), the metaphors deposited in the treasure of language. (p. 56)

With this understanding of the trait as the basis of representation and perception, Stellardi, as Derrida has done in various contexts, distances himself from the classic distinction between “proper” and “metaphoric” meaning, since the “proper” can never reduce or suspend the system of differences— that is to say, the trait—that allows for anything to be intelligible or representable in the first place. In contrast to the rigidly dichotomic opposition between the “proper” and the “metaphoric,” he defines metaphor in relative distinction to an “effect of immediate pertinence” that is itself defined by a reader in relation to a given context. This definition therefore not only speaks generally in terms of ‘texts’ and ‘contexts’ (instead of immediately recognizable textual events such as words or even propositions), it also accounts for the agency of the reader: “Metaphoric meaning is not metaphoric in itself, but only in relation to the ordinary context applied by . . . ‘the reader’” (p. 58). Rather than be defined as a sovereign agent who generates and fixes all contexts, the reader is characterized as perceiving meaning at the intersection of multiple contexts and a given text (with the implication that this intersection is necessary because a text, by itself, would be unintelligible). Consequently, metaphor is defined as “a meaning-effect generated by way of interaction between two contexts with reference to a text” (p. 51). It is with this broader notion of metaphor in place that Stellardi sets out, in his respective readings of Heidegger and Derrida, to discover “[i]nstruments … capable of perceiving on the one hand the genesis and life of metaphor, and on the other the events of a metaphoric order that escape immediate perception, often because they exceed the span of both the word and the proposition” (p.30).

Stellardi seeks such instruments first by discussing, with respect to the brief history he traces of philosophy’s relation to metaphor, the intermediary cases of Hegel and Ricœur, philosophers who, each in his own way, valorize metaphor and expand its proper domain beyond that of the merely local or rhetorical while still maintaining its subordination to rationality. Stellardi’s assessing at length the debate over metaphor between Ricœur and Derrida (which, as his chosen means of explicating Derrida on metaphor, occupies the entire second chapter) is directed at demonstrating why, as Stellardi had begun to argue in chapter one, Derrida merits pride of place in a study of the relationship between philosophy and metaphor. That is to say, in his debate with Ricœur in particular, as in his early writings generally, Derrida is demonstrated as having moved a step beyond the novel, important, but still-too-conventional conception of metaphor that Ricœur develops in The Rule of Metaphor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) (La métaphore vive, Paris: Seuil,1975). Heidegger, by contrast, seems to merit the attention given to him by Stellardi primarily for the particular vigor and singularity of his failed attempt to keep metaphor at bay. Derrida thus emerges as the more radical and philosophically compelling of the two figures. For Stellardi, Derrida represents:

the point of maximum advance in the questioning about metaphor and philosophy: (a) because he explicitly poses the question and deals with it up to its extreme consequences; (b) because in his writing the ‘metaphorical capacity’ is more apparent than elsewhere; and (c) because in his texts the status and the site of philosophy are constantly under examination, which allows the relationship between metaphor and philosophy to be analyzed beyond the traditional and reassuring scheme. (pp. 114-115)

It is not surprising, then, that for Stellardi, defining metaphor becomes largely a matter of defining deconstruction in the writings of Derrida and of showing, in particular, how Derrida’s “undecidables” are “metaphors denied,” which is to say, metaphors that refuse to be tamed, along the lines of Western philosophy’s traditional thought of metaphor, by a finite analogy and thus neutralized in their capacity to disrupt and create “incompleteness.” More significantly, in
addition to reading Derrida from this point, Stellardi draws out the consequences of the “metaphor denied” for philosophy understood as a unique mode of discourse among others.

This final gesture concerning the identity of philosophy occupies chapter four and, before we discuss it, we need to ask in what ways, for Stellardi, Heidegger and Derrida mark an historical shift in philosophy’s relation to metaphor. Generally put, Stellardi justifies the privileged attention he gives to Derrida and Heidegger by noting that (a) each attracts questions that concern the meaning of philosophy itself; (b) they make fundamental points concerning metaphor and its relationship to philosophy; (c) their discourse has a proximity to poetic discourse; and (d) their “paths of thought, albeit different, seem to share an essential quality that I shall provisionally call incompleteness; and this quality seems to have a lot to do with the special (and at times uneasy) relationship they entertain with metaphor” (p. 39). The incompleteness marked here is partly an opening to questioning that is anything but unconventional in philosophical discourse. More significantly, it is observable in an absence of reassuring answers. Incompleteness marks Stellardi’s own project not for the incidental or secondary reasons that he announces, namely, that the questions he addresses are too broad and the program of philosophical and historical research into uses and theories of metaphor that he deems necessary appears too immense, but rather, for a reason that Stellardi explicates over the course of his study, because there can be no “general theory” of metaphor that does not thereby subordinate, control, rationalize, and thus exclude the “essence” of metaphor and prevent it from working within and for philosophy. But, absent such a general theory, how, precisely, do Heidegger and Derrida allow metaphor to work for philosophy? To outline Stellardi’s response to this question, let us first consider what Stellardi writes in his third chapter, “Heidegger: Metaphors That Hurt.”

Stellardi first points out that since, for Heidegger, metaphor depends on and belongs to metaphysics, understanding Heidegger’s rejection of metaphor entails understanding Heidegger’s attempt to overcome metaphysics and representational thinking. With this in mind, Stellardi takes note of the metaphoric nature of Heidegger’s writing and asks whether Heidegger does not contradict himself. Whereas Ricoeur addresses the issue by asserting that Heidegger criticizes only “dead” metaphor while himself employing “living metaphor,” and whereas Jean Greisch, who first pursued at length the question of Heidegger’s relation to metaphor, argues that Heidegger “realizes the inadequacy of the theoretical basis on which the current notion of metaphor is erected” (p.141), Stellardi argues that “Heidegger accepts without problem the traditional notion of metaphor, and consequently condemns it with no possibility of appeal” (ibid.). Heidegger’s condemnation, as assessed by Stellardi, only makes the question of Heidegger’s use of metaphor more pertinent. Heidegger’s condemnation of metaphor is, moreover, novel in that Heidegger does not oppose concept to metaphor, but thinks of the two as complicit forms of representation. Heidegger thus expands metaphor’s domain of perniciousness by linking it to representational or conceptual thinking generally. What interests Stellardi is that, as a consequence of this novel position, something unusual happens to metaphor within Heidegger’s text that is more significant than if Heidegger had limited himself rigorously to using living metaphors or criticized a time-honored theory of metaphor and supplanted it with another. Specifically, within Heidegger’s text, “[metaphor] breaks up, it breaks down, it stops, it is paralyzed; it suffers and causes suffering” (p. 141). In Heidegger, metaphor, the “central mechanism of philosophical reason,” has its link with reason exposed and blocked. This is what, for Stellardi, makes the experience of reading Heidegger inescapably painful. The suffering of Heidegger’s thought and the suffering it causes are not a mere effect of style (as in the assessment of Henri Birault, who calls Heidegger’s thought “grey” and opposes it to Nietzsche’s “intoxication”); rather, they result from Heidegger’s “operation.”

It is significant that this operation is not recognized and embraced as such by Heidegger. Such inadvertence contrasts with the explicitly advanced arguments Stellardi finds in Derrida’s writings. The operation is, thus, the result of a blind spot or error of sorts. Let us consider how Stellardi arrives at this conclusion. Heidegger attempts to escape metaphors and representational thinking by seeking the true and essential relationship between language and Being, for instance, in the tautology of Die Sprache spricht. Stellardi says of this formula the following:

Tautology is, in language, the closest one gets to silence. Tautology is therefore what best (but still very imperfectly) allows us to step back into what precedes representation. And there it becomes possible to perceive the essence of language. Any other means (image, metaphor, definition) reproduces the structure of representation, makes language work as representation and therefore misses its object at the very moment when it (illusorily) grasps it. (p.168)
Through tautology and his rejection of metaphor, Heidegger hopes to “sojourn in the speaking of speech” (p.149). Despite Heidegger’s intentions, then, for Stellardi, the problem with this formula for acceding to non-representational thinking is that metaphor, once it is expelled, comes back. This is the lesson that Stellardi draws from Heidegger’s massive recourse to “poetic” writing. It constitutes a particular form of return: a return in which metaphor suffers. To substantiate the existence of the latter, Stellardi analyzes, as a telling example of Heidegger’s writing throughout Unterwegs zur Sprache, the rhetorical structure of “Die Sprache,” the first text in that collection and, in particular, Heidegger’s reading of Georg Trakl’s poem “Ein Winterabend.” What emerges from Stellardi’s dual emphasis on the themes of “threshold” and “suffering” in Heidegger’s reading of Trakl’s poem is the idea that “Heidegger’s metaphor is painful because it detains us indefinitely on a threshold” (p.159). This leads, finally, to a description of Heidegger’s general “operation,” which, by (among other things) “bestowing to poetry the quality and function of a sacred text,” manages:

- to produce a strange and unfamiliar atmosphere (intervention of a poetic and sacred aura, pseudoetymological action on words, and so forth);
- to question our habitual representations, without actually refuting them through argumentation, rather rejecting them as devoid of any essential truth; and
- to introduce a new idea, in an obscure and fragmentary manner, protecting it in advance from any possibility of direct confrontation with generally received ideas, stating from the very beginning its constitutive unthinkability. (p.175)

As concerns metaphor, this strange, obscure, and fragmentary production of something new means that metaphor remains on a painful threshold. It is, as Stellardi’s original French puts it, “en souffrance;” that is, literally, suffering, or, figuratively, pending, or awaiting (but never reaching) its final point of destination (which, here, is a way of saying “full representation”). This seems to imply that Heidegger’s metaphor cannot, as in Ricoeur’s reading, be thought of as “living.” It is not entirely “living,” but, for the same reason, it is not entirely “dead.” Its threshold existence keeps it hovering between the two traditionally defined haunts of metaphor:

In Heidegger’s text, perhaps, metaphor suffers, but not enough. Perhaps it is not dead, not absent, not absent enough to ensure the philosopher’s satisfaction. It shows, shamelessly, its suffering… It shows itself, but not in its full glory: It appears in humiliation and sorrow. Condemned, disavowed, and nevertheless present, always there, waiting. (p. 143).

As concerns philosophy, the arrival of this self-mourning metaphor becomes for Stellardi the constructive occasion for confronting the disquiet that faces philosophy in its apparent crisis of identity. In the joyless impasse of Heidegger’s operation Stellardi discovers a means by which philosophy can legitimate and further itself even as it mourns the loss of its former mastery and brilliance. This is, not surprisingly, a similar conclusion to the one Stellardi reaches when depicting deconstruction: “… with Derrida, philosophy is not even trying to kill itself. On the contrary, it survives indefinitely by elaborating its own mourning [note to Derrida’s Glas, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986)]. … Catching a glimpse of the impossibility of “closing” a discourse does not mean declaring its end; on the contrary, it opens (almost) infinite avenues for continuation” (p.116).

In chapter four, “Of Philosophy,” Stellardi, on the strength of his separate investigations into metaphor in and by Heidegger and Derrida, demarcates philosophy from other modes of discourse by first arguing that, according to certain of its aspects as it is practiced today, philosophy relies upon a “strong meaning,” as opposed to a “weak meaning.” The latter type of meaning designates correspondence theories or formal notions of truth; the former, the unverifiable truth that involves beliefs, value systems, and such things whose vastness makes them incapable of being subject to proof. Stellardi posits that these two types of truth rarely exist in pure absence of the other. Nonetheless, unlike other modes of discourse that may invoke “strong” truth incidentally, philosophy invokes it necessarily: “In the philosophical discourse, there is no avoiding (strong) truth. The pursuit of this sort of truth is the ultima ratio and the only justification of this discourse” (p.212). This justification, however, is merely an “ethical attraction of a truth without foundations” (p.228). Thus, in the place of logical or objective proof that would legitimate its claims, philosophy finds itself spurred on by an ethical imperative which is not wholly justifiable: “The crucial point is that the producer of this mode of discourse, though a philosopher, cannot explain the reason for the most significant movements of his own thought. They are, however, not unjustified: They have a status similar (though not identical) to
that of beliefs or values, they belong to the ethical order” (p.215).

In the final pages of his work, Stellardi returns to the four poles of his investigation (Heidegger and Derrida; philosophy and metaphor) and states forthrightly the relations that he conceives between them. As for the former pair, what is only an implicit or provisionally stated critique of Heidegger in chapter three is now made without caveat or hedge:

In the functioning of the philosophical mode of discourse, the role of metaphor is not secondary. In a sense, we can say that metaphor is the essential instrument of philosophy, which confirms Heidegger’s ideas. However, contrary to this opinion, I believe that metaphor remains essential even in thought that strives to overcome metaphysics and representation. This is for the excellent reason that, for philosophy, at least as it is constituted today, there is no possibility of truly overcoming representation. (p. 232)

What we see confirmed in this passage in particular is that Stellardi does not necessarily sacrifice a balanced approach to the two figures he focuses on—in terms of mere number of pages, Heidegger receives more attention,—but does read one (Heidegger) in terms of the other (Derrida). The critique of Heidegger’s flight from representation is Derridean and recalls in particular Derrida’s readings of Husserl. It is not surprising, then, that Stellardi ends his work on a defense of philosophy as deconstruction, or of deconstruction as philosophy. Nonetheless, Stellardi’s reflections on metaphor do not necessarily box him into a corner of Derrida aficionados and partisans. What Stellardi works out with respect to certain methodological problems of philosophizing about metaphor is perhaps the most compelling of his contributions. He maintains the validity of both a narrow notion of metaphor and a broader one so as to argue for the specificity of the philosophical enterprise. It is this argument that constitutes Stellardi’s principal contribution and the point at which, I believe, his work must be assessed; I thus quote at length a salient statement thereof:

The philosophical discourse, because of the type of objects it handles and the mechanism that animates it, invokes metaphor. Concepts (and in general the rigidity of scientific languages) and the more open forms of poetic or literary discourse are unable to manage the spaces of meaning and the requirements facing philosophy. Metaphor, on the other hand, plays the principal role, because it is flexible and malleable enough to satisfy both the requirement of extension of sense and that of control of discourse, which are the two central engines of philosophy. This, however, only concerns a rather superficial level of the philosophical text; at this level only one can legitimately speak of metaphor as an instrument, and of the author as somebody who can choose his instruments. At a deeper level, this way of looking at it makes no sense, as there is no choice. The most crucial core of the philosophical operation (the one I indicated as “strong truth”) has neither place nor being of its own, and is only accessible indirectly by way of representations and metaphorical displacements. All the meaning of philosophical discourse resides in the controlled approach to the “hard” cores, and can be achieved exclusively by way of metaphor (in the wide sense). (p. 233)

Does Stellardi find the instruments capable of perceiving “the genesis and life of metaphor” that he says he seeks? It appears that this formula would bring Stellardi back to the rigid dichotomy of living and dead metaphors that he tries to avoid. But perhaps because what seems Stellardi’s motivating question—what is philosophy? or, rather, how is philosophy to survive, to live on?—the question of life remerges, albeit unsteadily. The life of philosophy is a limping, suffering, anxious life. If metaphor has traditionally been recognized as an exercise full of joy and marked by resolution, full representation and stable, illuminating analogies, in Heidegger and Derrida in particular, metaphor is broken, suffering, and denied. Nonetheless, as their examples show, metaphor remains invoked everywhere by philosophy necessarily, inescapably. Moreover, the status of metaphor is not a total impasse, for within this realm of instability, incompleteness, and endless queries, philosophy finds its chance to survive in the face of mounting challenges from, in particular, the social sciences and literature. Consequently, the “imperfect” thought of Heidegger and Derrida is a sort of joyless joy in which Stellardi finds the promise of philosophy’s present and future. Through its limping, half-alive, half-absent mode of discourse, philosophy can discover and create unstable, inexhaustible, and ultimately unverifiable spaces of meaning that other modes of discourse, when left to their own devices, can never wholly reduce or overtake. Not only can it do this, but, for Stellardi, the philosopher is one who responds to this capacity as to an ethical imperative. Philosophy’s constitutive trait is the search for a founding truth. However, philosophy discovers, without feeling the less obliged to pursue the truth, that the truth, like the imperative to uncover
it, is without ultimate foundations.

Philip M. Adamek
State University of New York at Buffalo

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