

Georgi Iliev

Institute for Literature – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

joro.s.iliev@gmail.com

## Images and Conceptual Figuration: A Materialist Perspective

### Abstract

The text is dedicated to the use of poetical figures and of images in the working with concepts, namely within the field of philosophy and literary theory. The large excursus starts from an attempt of the American theoretician Mitchell to define images by only restricting his effort to historicizing the definition – with no definition of himself. A follow-up is the conception of Jacques Derrida of all metaphysical concepts being hidden metaphors whose meaning was depleted of figuration. In this context is viewed the work of Hegel on symbolic thought and memory. Image is revealed as an instrument of memory. And finally, there is a hypothesis of the material in signification borrowed to a certain extent from the deconstructionist Paul de Man.

**Keywords:** Hegel, Derrida, Mitchell, deconstruction, figural concepts, imagery

This text appeared as a result of our joint project and effort with our Slovenian colleagues – our literary institute and their literary institute. From the very beginning I intended to take as a venture point an opinion of the visual and literary theorist William John Thomas Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* and in more detail on the opening essay *What is an Image?* Mitchell's idea is not to provide us with a definition of imagery, but to replace it with a historicization of the debate between textuality and imagery, between the textual and the visual. The reason for that is because all of our different concepts for image (no matter the meaning – iconic symbol, mental image, gestalt, mimetic image, picture of the world, form of intuition, transcendental scheme) are foundational for human thinking and we cannot hope to find a metaposition for a definition. This is what Mitchell writes, but the Kantian forms of intuition and transcendental schemes

are no images. But nevertheless, I wanted to work on images theoretically and on the philosophical and literary theoretical conceptual figuration. We can adapt this concept of the visual for our work on national literatures and world literature – be them illustrated, or mimetic, or antimimetic.

Why do we have this compulsion to conceive of the relation between words and images in political terms, as a struggle for territory, a contest of rival ideologies? I try to suggest some entailed answers to this question in subsequent chapters, but a short answer may be provided here: the relationship between words and images reflects, within the realm of representation, signification, and communication, the relations we posit between symbols and the world, signs and their meanings. We imagine the gulf between words and images to be as wide as the one between words and things, between (in the largest sense) culture and nature. The image is the sign that pretends not to be a sign, masquerading as (or, for the believer, actually achieving) natural immediacy and presence. The word is its “other,” the artificial, arbitrary production of human will that disrupts natural presence by introducing unnatural elements into the world—time, consciousness, history, and the alienating intervention of symbolic mediation. Versions of this gap reappear in the distinctions we apply to each type of sign in its own turn. There is the natural, mimetic image, which looks like or “captures” what it represents, and its pictorial rival, the artificial, expressive image which cannot “look like” what it represents because that thing can only be conveyed in words. There is the word which is a natural image of what it means (as in onomatopoeia) and the word as arbitrary signifier. And there is the split in written language between “natural” writing by pictures of objects, and the arbitrary signs of hieroglyphics and the phonetic alphabet. (Mitchell 1986: 43 – 44)

## My Two Questions

But why should we choose exactly imagery as a prism of our theoretical investigation of culture? What I mean is that images – like signs, to be honest – are, as a whole, a denomination of the ontological field, a name for being and thinking themselves. There is nothing that cannot be considered an image or a sign in some context. This is a most general question and unfortunately, a meaningless one: What is an image? And I think, I am not contradicting Mitchell’s project here. That is why, I am going to propose a different question, which is not inferred from the previous one – they are not related yet within our text, – but the more narrow question may turn out to be helpful and elucidating for the general one. I am not claiming that the narrower question is being disguised as a general one in order to get prestige – I am just hoping that the fields of the two questions might somehow intersect. The first one was “What is an image?”, the second one is “**Why are works of art (I mean visual arts by that) used for philosophical and**

**theoretical purposes?”** And my answer is Hegelian. It sounds like that: It has something to do with the material base of memory and of the symbolic. And if you protest immediately against the use of “material” in the Hegelian context, I would say that you will have to wait until the end of the text and hope for more clarity.

And another thing we can notice within this profound quote by Mitchell, especially if we approach it with Derridean deconstructionist mindset. Mitchell tries to define image or meaningfully refuses to do so, but even in the beginning of his definition or refusal we encounter the difficulty of the purely conceptual rendition. Something like a circular argument appears since Mitchell uses an image to define (or defuse a definition for) images. He uses a spatializing<sup>1</sup> metaphor, a spatialization: “the gulf between words and images to be as wide as the one between words and things, between (in the largest sense) culture and nature”. Is the spatializing metaphor an inevitable part of the philosophical figuration? But it is a peculiar specialization. In the “two gulfs” there are a countless amounts of *topoi* but actually there is nothing quantitative<sup>2</sup>. We will come to the issue of spatialization later on.

So imagery is not definable from outside, from a metaposition. We are going to do something similar to Mitchell’s attempt with the historization of the concept of image, but even his attempt seems to me an overreach – the bases of his historization is image as a sign while so many conceptions of signs in general exist. I am approaching the problem asking why imagery is *still* used for cognitive, for philosophical purposes? *Still*, because images designate concepts that are very hard to analyze and with the rise of analysis in the modern philosophy, they would have gone obsolete. But they persist.

My main example is a psychoanalytic one and you might say that it is obvious why images and the imaginary are meaningful within the psychoanalytic field. But I ask, what is so appropriate in the image that makes it a successful carrier of memory? Two authors come to mind if we consider the issue within the continental tradition – Hegel and Derrida. I will say a few words on both of them before I concentrate on my psychoanalytical example. To my opinion, first comes Derrida – it is, of course, an anach-

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<sup>1</sup>“Spatiality” is used in this sense for the first time by Jacques Derrida in the text “Double Session” in his book *Dissemination*.

<sup>2</sup> A somehow similar spatialization I encountered in the famous work of the German Romance philologist Ernst-Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* where he uses the following metaphor: “The pastoral world is as extensive as the knightly world”. The two worlds contain costless amounts of rhetorical toposes. It is spatial, but there is nothing quantitative in it. Plus, it is our own world. Although it is “extensive”, one cannot even explain it by means of Immanuel Kant’s “intensive quantities”!

ronism, but Derrida puts the question more fundamentally – Why is philosophical figuration inevitable? – while Hegel starts his argument in both *Encyclopedia, Vol. 3* and *Aesthetics, Vol. 1* as to what could we do with symbols. And on the issue whether philosophical figuration is imagery, it is also necessary to consult the work of Jacques Derrida.

## White Mythology

In his important text “White Mythology”, the renowned French philosopher Jacques Derrida claims that ontology is the myth that there can be a language without figuration, or to be more precise, a language without metaphoricity. Ontological concepts pretend to be the most basic concepts, which are devoid of all figurative load – they should be purely conceptual. Ontology is, with bitterness or derision, called a “white mythology” by Derrida. Now, if we take a closer look on this pure conceptuality spotted by Derrida as an ontological claim, we can easily infer that it should mean to analyze the concepts till all figuration is cleansed and only the basic building blocks remain. Does Derrida say that? Well, it depends. That is the legendary quote by Anatole France, and included in the text of Derrida, on how metaphysical (or ontological) concepts are produced:

I was thinking how the Metaphysicians, when they make a language for themselves, are like [image, comparison, a figure in order to signify figuration] knife-grinders, who instead of knives and scissors, should put medals and coins to the grindstone to efface the exergue, the value and the head. When they have worked away till nothing is visible in their crown-pieces, neither King Edward, the Emperor William, nor the Republic they say: “These pieces have nothing either English, German or French about them: we have freed them from all limits of time and space; they are not worth five shillings anymore; they are of an inestimable value, and their exchange value is extended indefinitely.” (France quoted by Derrida 1985: 210, “White Mythology”)

Taken as a conceptual procedure, the grinding of coins it can be interpreted both as an analysis and as an added subtlety of meaning, elevation of meaning. The first interpretation is not much elaborated by Derrida – only the second one. He claims that the pretense of ontology (or metaphysics) consists in the reduced meaning of its concepts that leads to their subtlety. So all the basic ontological concepts are hidden metaphors – *idea*, *eidos* (*image*), *concept* (*begetting a baby*), *category* (*accusation*). Thus his logic of supplementation unfolds: the reduction of meaning, or the addition of meaning, is either too much, or too little, and this is a law throughout the whole field of signification. But the interpreting of the quote as an example of analytical procedure is referred by Derrida only as a reduction of

metaphoricity. According to my opinion, this interpretation could render a lot more.

I mean “analysis”, but not exactly in the terms of the analytical philosophical tradition. Analysis is practiced as early as Plato in his dialogue “Sophist”. I mean the first method Plato suggests for discovering ideas in “Sophist”, namely, subjecting things to dividing and cleansing, *diairesis* and *catharsis*. By means of consecutive dividing of a thing into an important, representative part and a minor, unimportant part, we can finally discern the sole entity, the idea. I can be with a long hair, or with a short hair, but nevertheless I am a human. It is quite similar a situation with the grinding of coins, which Derrida calls further on a reduction of figuration.

The depiction on the coin is effaced by using a grinder. It is a metaphor of the increased subtlety of concepts. But it is nothing more than the procedure of dividing the coin from the depicted image and cleansing the image. It does not matter that the face of the coin is effaced with a grinder! Plato initially tries to define the sophist as a hunter. It does not matter what happens to those hunters that turn out not to be sophists – they are removed. Anyway, rhetorically, the operation of effacement can be interpreted as the depletion of the figure (namely, metaphor or metonymy) of some of its concrete meanings, leaving only the abstractions. Yet logically, the effacement is nothing more than analysis, division. Since we do not have the Platonic prejudices about the primacy of ideas over things, we are confronted by an ever more ambiguous question, which I can only hope Derrida would like. Which one is actually effaced – the coin or the image on it – which is the cleansed one? This is a true Derridean logic of supplementation. Which one represents the concept, and which one – the figurative surplus? And how much should be effaced to change the meaning into a new one? And is it all a spatial procedure – the grinding of figures and the figuration itself, I mean? Is spatiality a sufficient reason for an image to occur? Doesn’t that mean that there is something more to the concept of figure and image, and linguistic figure also, that is absolutely necessarily added above the spatialization of the image-sign – at least for the philosophical figuration? And my answer is that in order for an image to occur, besides the spatiality, what is necessary is some kind of indecisiveness, a boundary, a borderline – the indecisiveness is it an image, or not – and this is the basis of conceptual figuration. Where the image ends and the sign begins, and vice-versa? But up to now this is only a hypothesis, since this kind of figures seems to be pretty unphilosophical. And the analysis they are interpreted by is indecisive. But let us add some more theory in order to clear up the case!

## Leibniz Hieroglyph

In the third part of his *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, Vol. 3, *Spirit* Hegel refers to a peculiar idea of Gottfried Leibniz for more successful philosophical concepts and analysis. Near the end of the second part of the third volume, where philosophical reasoning should at last find its crowning in the sub-part “Thinking”, appears the interpretation of a Leibnizian suggestion for better conceptual analyses and hence, for clear concepts. The project, as described by Hegel, consists in replacing the existing concepts with Chinese hieroglyphs. The benefits are many. Hieroglyphic writing is artificial according to Leibniz and that presupposes a more responsible acts of conceptualizing. Plus, hieroglyphs are visual and they are composite entities – they are composed of visible and easily detachable units. It should lead to the opportunity of inserting corrections into thinking with less pain and misunderstandings. Plus, the hieroglyph represents a mandatory initial procedure of analyses that would bring the much coveted and elusive initial clarity into thinking. And a part of this overall clarity is the visual basis of the hieroglyphic concept – it is at first visual and then anything else.

Leibniz’s practical mind misled him to exaggerate the advantages which a complete written language, formed on the hieroglyphic method (...) would have as a universal language for the intercourse of nations and especially of scholars. (...) At any rate a comprehensive hieroglyphic language for ever completed is impracticable. Sensible objects no doubt admit of permanent signs; but, as regards signs for mental objects, the progress of thought and the continual development of logic lead to changes in the views of their internal relations and thus also of their nature; and this would involve the rise of a new hieroglyphical denotation. (Hegel 2010: 459)

Hegel responds with several arguments, but there are two main ones. On the one hand, the philosophical hieroglyphic concept will be too reactive to all social arguments. It shall react by amending itself every time a new discovery enters, e.g. chemistry, and everyone shall be able to amend the concept because every amendment is visible and explainable. And secondly, hieroglyphic concepts will be deprived of any touch with the tradition of thinking – that is the major drawback of artificiality. So the old-style figural concepts appear to be better suited for the tasks of thinking. It is so if we assume that the new concepts suggested by Leibniz are purely visual hieroglyphics, and the traditional ones would be, like the Platonic ones, depleted metaphors – like the ones described by Derrida.

Hegelian philosophical figuration and figurative language, paradoxically, does not posit a self-evident, an “easy-to-see” concept, but on the

contrary, stands for the traditional figurative philosophical concepts just in order to make them obscure. That should mean, when we philosophize, we need an incomprehensible refuse and it must be in the form of an image. But what kind of image is this and why do we need it? I am advancing this question provided that exactly the Leibnizean analytical concept that has the character of a hieroglyphic depiction. The Leibnizian hieroglyph is the concept Mitchell designated as a written word *containing also an image*, it bears something of a refuse image! Yet Leibniz embraces the hieroglyph in order to make an analytical procedure. The parts of it are visible and hence easier to control. The analytical procedure presupposes breaking up the hieroglyph into as much parts as it is necessary to make it appropriate to handle. In this case spatiality acts contrary to figuration!

We must be able to think through figures what we do not know we think, to claim what we do not know we claim! That is the Hegelian perspective. In order to have the traditionally philosophical concepts (or philosophical figurations, as we have already shown), we have to be able to think what is inherently indecisive and what is actually, in compliance with the laws of thinking. This in compliance of figuration, in the context of one of the postmodern interpretations of Kant and Hegel, is called by the renowned American deconstructionist Paul de Man *materiality*. Materiality in this sense holds the key to the philosophical conceptual function of imagery and figuration that rejects spatiality.

### **Materiality in Kant and Hegel (Paul de Man)**

There are three types of statements regarding quality according to Hegel's *Science of Logic*: singular, particular and universal. Imagery is usually defined by the singular of intuition, particulars are the classes of objects and the defining of universal abstractions is universal. But how come the singular is recognizable or subjected to mediation at all? I mean the following: if the particulars are concepts on their way to the universal and these concepts are developed initially from intuitions (from singulars), then how an intuition can be perceived at all when it is not yet mediated, when it is not yet conceptualized? And last but not least, how can we recognize images at all? The Hegelian answer in his *Encyclopedia* is, to put it briefly, the following: images exist because memory exists. Memory is an undeveloped form of thinking – it shall be later on mediated into thinking. But is the word “primitive” appropriate here? Here we can memorize this question and make a short excursion into the aesthetic work of Paul de Man on Kant and Hegel, which is going to be clarified in three hypotheses.

First hypothesis: Memorization and art could be easily equated with the symbolic thinking which does not understand its symbols. Hegel's *Aesthet-*

ics distinguishes the symbolic art as a primitive stage of artistic development associated with the art of ancient Egypt and mythological art. And we should remember that art is located in the part of religion within Hegel's Phenomenology. So that is the traditional Hegel from the *Aesthetics* where he says in order for symbolic and memorization to occur, the creators and recipients of the symbol have to forget the better part of its meaning, they have to flatten it and store it within the vault of images through the act of memorization. Egyptians do not know the meaning of their pyramids.

Second hypothesis: Memorization and art could be equated with the work of the unconscious – like for example in Freud's *Gradiva*. An important aspect of psychoanalysis is that imagery and speech are figures of the same unconscious processes. It is the Freudian concept of the unconscious. It is not the Lacanian unconscious, which is related to the subject as a discursive construct – and so is the Lacanian unconscious, but more of a Freudian vault, that is in Freud's and Jensen's *Gradiva*.

And third hypothesis: It is a postmodern interpretation of Hegel and it dwells upon his astounding endeavor with conceptualizing art. This is the theory of Paul de Man developed from the views of Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* and Hegel from the *Encyclopedia, V. 3, Spirit and Aesthetics*. Let us take a look at de Man's work on Kant first. Memorization and images could be viewed within the perspective of the work of Paul de Man and the material, as he calls it. It is a very elaborate concept of Paul de Man, this so called "material vision" or "materialistic vision". It is related to how we should observe objects in order for them to appear sublime and to de Man's analysis of the Analytic of the Sublime from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. The natural beautiful must be conceived as purposive without a purpose, without a concrete purpose. As for the sublime, it does not evoke the feeling of purposiveness, but is manifested in two kinds that are actually three according to de Man. The mathematical sublime of infinite measure, the dynamic sublime of violent nature and, as a subdivision of the dynamic sublime, the "material sublime" from the remarkable article of de Man "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant". This is the vision of an object devoid of any signifying value of the vision, which is the thing that makes it sublime. The material is what resists the signification.

And in the same way, if we are to call the sight of the ocean sublime, we must not think of it as we ordinarily do, as implying all kinds of knowledge (that are not contained in immediate intuition). For example, we sometimes think of the ocean as a vast kingdom of aquatic creatures, or as the great source of those vapors that fill the air with clouds for the benefit of the land, or again as an element that, though dividing continents from each other, yet promotes the greatest communication between them; all these produce merely teleological judgments. To find the ocean nevertheless sublime we must regard it as poets

do, merely by what the eye reveals—if it is at rest, as a clear mirror of water only bounded by the heavens; if it is stormy, as an abyss threatening to overwhelm everything. (Kant, *Critique of Judgment* as quoted by Paul de Man's translation, 1996: 80)

The Kantian vault represents the zero degree of imagery and everything that is to be put into this vault of sleeping symbols, also acquires this zero degree of imagery. Now, how can a vision be exactly devoid of any signifying value? By storing it into the vault of memory. This is in some way the Freudian vision of the unconscious – quite unlike the Lacanian vision. I shall by this enter the second and more practical part of my text, which is dedicated to Freud's analysis of Jensen's novelette *Gradiva*. I will later on again use Paul de Man and will try to show that in order to store something into the vault of images, what is necessary is to have a work of art at hand – be it a painting or a poetic work. Poetry can be as difficult to understand as the hieroglyphs on an Egyptian pyramid!

Memorization becomes a subject of philosophy because logical clearness is not enough for thinking to arise according to Hegel. Thinking is not something an individual does by himself. Anything can be inferred only logically on the basis of a universal relation of being and on the basis of a universal causality. Anything can be inferred without any human being at all – and Hegel, in relation to this, probably remembered the philosophy of Leibniz with his endless concept and endless analytical judgment<sup>3</sup>. Yet the subject has to not only infer arguments, but he has to also remember and forget things. In this sense, memory cannot be good or bad – it is not individual, it is a process of signs and images. Memorization is appointed as an activity of spirit that is situated between intuition and thinking. But as far as certain causality would lead every logical argument (be it even an argument of the dialectical logic!), what would then be the basic unit of memorization, what would it cleave to? What is necessary is what in English is called memo and in Bulgarian I will call it *rabosh* (*рабощ*). A small wooden table on which the old traders marked some bills, events, using a code enigmatic even to them. Something between pictograms and initials, and so... What is necessary is something material, a memo in order for memorization to occur. It must be an image to be material, something not to be completely reducible to any signifying function. But either there are signs, which means everything is signs, or there are no signs at all. So the memo must be absolved from every signifying nature except for its mate-

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<sup>3</sup> In his *Discourse on Metaphysics* Leibniz claims that all statements are analytical, if we use the Kantian term. That means every subject contains in its concept all possible statements that could be predicated of it. That would mean the whole world becomes an endless concept.

rialness. And the material is nothing but its inability to be reduced to any signifying functions – it must remain something of an eternal enigma to us. And what we do then, we store it in the vault of memory, which can be no other than a vault of images where meanings go to sleep.

Paul de Man proclaims the functioning of both causality and imagination to be without material basis. But he labels only the *material* as a bearer of memorization. Following Hegel in the *Aesthetics* and the *Encyclopedia*, de Man writes:

We can perceive the most fleeting and imagine the wildest things without any change occurring to the surface of the world, but from the moment we memorize, we cannot do without such a trace, be it as a knot in our handkerchief, a shopping list, a table of multiplication, a psalmodized singsong or plain chant, or any other memorandum. Once such a *notation* has occurred, the inside-outside metaphor of experience and signification can be forgotten, which is the necessary (if not sufficient) condition for thought (*Denkeri*) to begin. The aesthetic moment in Hegel occurs as the conscious forgetting of a consciousness by means of a materially actualized system of notation or inscription. (Paul de Man, “Hegel on the Sublime”, 1996: 109)

Therefore, it is pretty convenient for the bearer of memorization to be a work of art. However, it is not the spatial element that is inscribed into memory. It is the indecisive material element. It may also be a work of the poetic art, provided that there is always an unexplainable, inexplicable and awry element in literature. So in order to attempt to further clarify this cross-section between language and imagery, we can turn to a psychoanalysis as a last part of this text.

### ***Gradiva*<sup>4</sup>**

And now comes Freud’s book about Jensen’s novelette *Gradiva*. What is *Gradiva* about? It is about a young archeologist who falls in love with an ancient bas-relief of a woman with a peculiar gait pattern. Norbert Khanold is his name and he falls prey to his fantasies and goes to Pompeii to look for the places where the girl walked when she was alive more than 2000 years ago. It all ends up pretty fine for him since he appears to find the root to his archeological perversion in the peculiar walk of his neighboring girl next door. It appears that for him to fall in love, it was necessary to forget the real girl, to store her into his unconscious, to store there the art image also in the vault of his unconscious, and to erase the sexual implications of them both, and... to start anew somehow.

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<sup>4</sup> That means Walking Girl in Latin, or the Walking One. That is the way the archeologist Khanold calls his imagined girl from the Latin depiction.

A paramount psychoanalytic interpretation of this relation between language and imagery is the work of Jacques Lacan and he should provide us with a something of a solution of the problem with the works of art. I mean the “imaginary” (imagery) element in the object of psychoanalysis, *objet petit a*. Lacan starts his mature endeavor by asking himself the following question: why should desire choose as its object another human being and why should it spend some time on this object – a day or two for example? Why, for example, do we not get satisfied with watching pictures of the other’s zones of sexual drive or only pick our drive zones – why is that not enough? One could say: Where does Lacan ask himself such a question? I answer: in his famous paper “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectics of Desire and Freudian Unconscious”! His answer is that in order for desire to arise, what is necessary is *objet petit a*, which has an imaginary (imagery) element. But in order for desire to tie to another person, what is necessary is the inclusion of the small object *a* in the discourse. But when it enters discourse, it can only be there out of place – like a *material* element within the discursive chain. Yet nevertheless *objet petit a* is an undefinable object of desire so it lacks spatiality. It is a material object, but within the Cartesian division between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, it would rather be in the realm of the thought than in the realm of extension. It has all the intensity of the realm of signification, but it needs to be material – at least in the subtle sense of de Man. The materiality of the work of art (Hegel) and the object of desire (Lacan) are thus entwined in the contemporary concept of imagery. Imagery is grafted on thought like a tattoo on skin, like a rhythm on a verse...

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