

Exchange on Nick Onuf's 'Metaphoricizing Modernity,' Part III– Reconfiguration of Modernity and/as Metaphor(s)

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Nicholas Onuf**

Abstract: In this Dossier, four scholars reflect on Nicholas Onuf's leading article, 'Metaphoricizing modernity', (re)engaging with – and celebrating – more broadly Onuf's groundbreaking work from different places, perspectives, and angles. Part III (re)engages with (his) reconfigurations of Modernity and/as metaphor(s), including an extensive, and much careful response from Onuf to those four scholars and their (re)readings published in this *Dossier: Celebrating Nicholas Onuf*. Michael Marks is the fourth scholar to engage with and reflect on Onuf's leading article, and his work more broadly. Marks reads Onuf's essay on metaphoricising modernity as an invitation to see modernity in terms of its metaphorical qualities; that is, as an opportunity to reflect not only on modernity, but on the nature of metaphors and how they figure in scholarly inquiry. More specifically, for him, Onuf's characterization of modernity as embodying notions of forward motion and territorial physicality is one of the main insights of his essay that could be further explored with additional theoretical analysis. Nicholas Onuf closes this Part and the Dossier more broadly, carefully engaging with and responding to the contributions of Victor Coutinho Lage (in Part I), Manuela Trindade Viana (in Part II), Roberto Vilchez Yamato (in Part II), and *Michael Marks (in Part III)*. *Rethinking reconfiguration as a general, constitutive process, Onuf (re)engages with modernization and modernity's universal ethos, while responding to his postcolonial critics and their (re)readings of his highly generalized model of world-making.* In so doing, Onuf also (re)engages with the concept and conceptualization of metaphors, repositioning his work and stance as a form of 'embodied anti-realism'. For him, old ontologies never die; like metaphors, they just layer up.

Keywords: metaphor; figure; concepts/conceptual; beginnings; modernity; universal; local.

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Modernity as metaphor: re-imagining progress and space

Michael Marks

There is much to admire in Nicholas Onuf's essay on metaphoricising modernity. One thing that stands out in particular is the article's attentiveness to etymology as a method for identifying the historical origins of many metaphors in contemporary use. Scholarly analysis of metaphors would benefit greatly from incorporating etymological research into understanding how linguistic and conceptual metaphors emerge from the ways humans express their understanding of physical experiences. Unfortunately, many scholars of metaphors do not pay sufficient attention to the etymological bases of metaphorical concepts, so it is refreshing to see that Onuf's essay puts special emphasis on this strategy for investigating and interrogating the way metaphors become established in human discourse. It is also helpful that the article is forthcoming about its conscious use of metaphors in order to emphasise key points, for example, the concept that modernity has a metaphorically spatial and directional quality when people speak of the 'rise' of modernity. With this being said, the article's insights could be more fully elaborated by delving even more deeply into the scholarly literature on metaphor analysis, particularly those in the field of cognitive linguistics. Below are some thoughts and suggestions for how the essay's observations could be given even more intellectual heft.

Placing metaphors in theoretical context

First, the article would benefit most from a more extensive review of the conceptual theory of metaphor which has come to dominate metaphor analysis among cognitive linguists and other scholars. The essay does briefly discuss the conceptual theory of metaphor and makes reference to one essay by Mark Johnson (2008). However, the article would be greatly enhanced by providing a more extensive assessment of the conceptual theory of metaphor as elaborated at great length by noted scholars who have pioneered this field (see, for example, Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987, 1993; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Turner 1987). One gets the sense from the essay, perhaps mistakenly, that Onuf is not entirely in agreement with the conceptual theory of metaphor. That is an understandable position inasmuch as scholars such as Lakoff, Johnson, and Turner obviously have their sceptics, in particular those who are more in favor of theories of the deliberate use of metaphor (see below).

Consequently, the main reason why the article necessitates an explicit evaluation of the conceptual theory of metaphor is that the essay seemingly raises doubts about its validity. Onuf's discussion of Johnson (2008) in particular cast a sceptical eye on the conceptual theory of metaphor and strongly implies that metaphors create concepts, as opposed to the other way around. Or at least that is one plausible reading. And yet it is worth taking seriously the considerable analytical weight of the conceptual theory of metaphor. As scholars such as Johnson, Lakoff, and Turner explain, conceptual metaphors start out

with physical experiences. This is stated explicitly in the title of Johnson's 1987 book *The Body in the Mind*. It is therefore worth taking some time to recall what the conceptual theory of metaphor states.

In the conceptual theory of metaphor, metaphorical concepts originate in humans' sensory experiences, of which there are five — sight, sound, smell, taste, and tactile sense. One of the examples I have used most frequently when I teach this subject is the conceptual metaphor of *LIGHT IS LEARNING*.¹¹ Indeed, Onuf acknowledges a variation on this conceptual metaphor when he refers to the metaphor of 'seeing is knowing.' This is a perfect example of a metaphorical concept originating in physical sensory experiences. Humans acquire information through all of their sense, but as primates, much (possibly the majority) of human learning comes about through visual inputs.

The conceptual theory of metaphor goes on to make a distinction between conceptual metaphors and linguistic metaphors. Linguistic metaphors are, as the term implies, linguistic expressions of underlying metaphorical concepts. Which is to say, conceptual metaphors precede linguistic metaphors.²² For example, the conceptual metaphor *LIGHT IS LEARNING* is expressed via any number of linguistic metaphors in the English language such as 'to shed light on,' to 'illuminate' a topic (to give an example where etymology obviously plays a role in identifying the metaphorical origins of an English word), and the historical era linguistically referred to as the 'Enlightenment,' itself juxtaposed with an era ostensibly lacking in knowledge, i.e., the 'Dark Ages,' a period where the absence of learning is associated with the absence of light.

Since humans learn primarily, although not exclusively, by way of visual stimuli, linguistic metaphors implying the equation of sight with learning include such fundamental expressions as 'I see' to connote that the speaker understands. To put this observation in a somewhat humorous context, but to make a larger point about how metaphorical concepts originate in sensory experiences, one can imagine this thought experiment: If dogs, who acquire information largely through scent, could talk, we might surmise that they would convey that they understand something not by saying 'I see' but by saying 'I smell,' in which case the concept of learning through olfactory means would be expressed linguistically by canines using the linguistic metaphor of 'smell' to imply the acquisition of information and/or knowledge. Which is not to say that human communication is devoid of linguistic metaphors that originate in the olfactory sense. Conceptually, metaphors such as *ODOUR IS DANGER* are common in the English language and are conveyed through such linguistic metaphors as 'I smell a rat,' 'that smells fishy,' something 'smells rotten,' and 'that stinks.'

But back to the metaphor of *LIGHT IS LEARNING*, questions arise as to Onuf's use of quotation marks around the word 'see' in his discussion of railroad tracks in relation to the linguistic metaphor of 'junction.' On the one hand, one interpretation is that Onuf 'sees' trains when he encounters junctions, which is to say, as a literal registering of visual inputs through the sense of sight. More likely, the use of quotation marks is meant to imply that Onuf is using the term to 'see' metaphorically to denote the concept of *learning* as associated with the processing of information obtained visually. In other words, in the

same way that the concept of a junction as an inflection point in life is part of the larger conceptual metaphor of LIFE IS A JOURNEY (see below), the visualization of branching pathways is expressed linguistically using metaphorical terms associated with light.

The need for the article to be more explicit about its position vis-à-vis the conceptual theory of metaphor comes about because at times the article conflates conceptual metaphors with linguistic metaphors. More to the point, at times the article seemingly suggests that it is taking a contrary view which openly challenges the conceptual theory of metaphors, agreeing to some extent with Orwell (1953) that linguistic metaphors precede concepts and in fact create concepts. This is revealed when Onuf writes: 'Concepts change because the metaphors we deploy in our stories continually *refresh* them' (emphasis in the original). To the extent it is Onuf's position that (linguistic) metaphors create concepts, which runs contrary to the conceptual theory of metaphor, it seems to me this could be addressed more explicitly and at greater length.

But, it is not entirely clear what position Onuf take with regards to the relationship between conceptual metaphors and linguistic metaphors. At one point in the article Onuf uses a linguistic metaphor that I have employed in my teaching when I have wanted students to understand the relationship between conceptual and linguistic metaphors. Specifically, Onuf writes about serving up 'some stew from the back burner'. Having something on the metaphorical 'back burner' is a linguistic expression of the larger conceptual metaphor of PROXIMITY IS PRIORITY. When we put something on the 'back burner' we mean that it is less important to attend to than to items on the front burner. A related linguistic metaphor that also emanates from the conceptual metaphor of PROXIMITY IS PRIORITY is the term keeping something 'close at hand.' That does not literally mean that an issue is *physically* proximate. It means that the issue has a high priority since, from the perspective of sensory experiences, things that are close to the human body are associated with immediate need or danger, as opposed to things that are far away. Something metaphorically 'close at hand' is of higher priority than something 'on the back burner.'

In short, the article's conceptualization of modernity in metaphorical terms requires closer attention be paid to developments in metaphor analysis which clarify the relationship between metaphorical concepts and their linguistic expressions. The conceptual theory of metaphor holds that human physical experiences influence how the mind conceptualizes abstract ideas. It is only after those experiences are framed as metaphorical concepts that humans articulate ideas using rhetorical tools including linguistic metaphors. To the extent humans are conscious about how their linguistic communication can actively shape others' thinking, the question then becomes to what extent such deliberate rhetorical discourse can be empirically verified.

Conceptual versus deliberate metaphors

Moving on from the previous discussion, there is a need in the essay to more explicitly engage the scholarly debate over conceptual metaphors versus deliberate metaphors. In certain places the article gives the strong impression that metaphors, i.e., linguistic metaphors, are discursive tools consciously used for specific purposes. In fact, the essay is

quite explicit about that, stating ‘Metaphor is a rhetorical device, deliberately deployed for persuasive purposes.’ However, the scholarly community is divided, or at the very least ambivalent, about that question. When cognitive linguists including the aforementioned Johnson, Lakoff, and Turner came up with the conceptual theory of metaphor a consensus began to emerge that the vast majority of metaphors are used reflexively and without much thought, because they are indeed underlying concepts essential to how the human brain operates. When someone says in English ‘John is a cold person,’ meaning John is emotionally aloof, they instinctively understand that human beings associate the physical experience of being cold as an unpleasant sensation. By contrast, if someone is a ‘hot head’ it is understood they have a volatile temper inasmuch as humans associate heat with the potential for dire outcomes, e.g., if they are experiencing a fever. Still more, someone who has a ‘warm’ personality or exhibits ‘warmth’ is understood to convey a pleasant demeanor since humans take comfort in being warm.

No one has to tell anyone that these conceptual metaphor ‘make sense.’ They are instinctual, which is to say, inherent to the physical experience of being human. Therefore any deliberate use of these metaphors is not necessarily for the purposes of persuasion, but simply to accentuate what people already comprehend. Cognitive linguists see all of this as fairly self-evident and contend that the vast majority of metaphors are conceptual in nature. I suppose there is then a bit of irony that the prominent cognitive linguist George Lakoff has served as a consultant to politicians in the United States seeking to craft political messaging. If Lakoff is convinced that metaphors are inherent in human cognition, there would be little sense in trying to persuade people to think metaphorically one way or another.

And yet it is precisely because metaphors have been used in any number of realms including politics and economics that the conceptual theory of metaphor has been challenged in recent years by the theory of deliberate metaphor. One of the more prominent elaborations of the theory of deliberate metaphors has been put forth by Gerald Steen (2013). Steen pushes back against the conceptual theory of metaphor, arguing that many metaphors in fact *are* used consciously and deliberately, not because people instinctively fall back on them.

Of course, both the conceptual theory of metaphor and the theory of deliberate metaphor are premised on the understanding that given the distinction between conceptual metaphors and linguistic metaphors, human *cognition* may rely on concepts conceived of metaphorically, while those conceptual metaphors are expressed *linguistically* in human communication. As to how much of that communication by means of linguistic metaphor is deliberate or reflexive, this is an empirical question, not one that can be answered *a priori*. There are obvious examples of the deliberate use of metaphors as well as those used reflexively. For example, the Chinese Communist Party quite deliberately crafts deliberate linguistic metaphors all the time, the ‘Great Leap Forward’ perhaps being the most well-known. There are also obvious examples of people using metaphors in a political context reflexively, for example, when people talk of the need for ‘transparency’ in government (recalling the conceptual metaphor of *LIGHT IS LEARNING*). There are even linguistic

metaphors that sometimes are used deliberately and sometimes used reflexively, as in the nauseating repetition of the ‘war’ on this, that, or the other scourge to society whether it be drugs, poverty, or even cancer for that matter.

The point is that the article may be too quick to adopt the position of the theory of deliberate metaphor without being sufficiently attentive to the debate between the deliberate theory of metaphor and the conceptual theory of metaphor. As noted, this matter is related to the question of the relationship between conceptual and linguistic metaphors that is at the heart not only of the conceptual theory of metaphor but is implicated in other theories as well. On several occasions the article opines that people ‘deploy’ metaphors (for example, when ‘refreshing’ them) which implies its alignment with the theory of deliberate metaphor, but, again, this needs to be clarified so as to more explicitly address the debate over the extent to which conceptual metaphors lead people to comprehend politics in certain ways as opposed to linguistic metaphors being deliberately employed by individuals in positions of political authority to bring about certain policy ends.

Universal metaphors versus metaphors in a cultural context

The issue of how metaphors are deployed (deliberately or reflexively) also raises questions about the debate over the extent to which metaphors reflect universal experiences among humans versus being socially constructed within a cultural context. Onuf’s article hints at this distinction when it refers to the ways in which metaphors frame stories. Onuf briefly suggests that story tellers can use metaphors to influence community discourse. Here Onuf inadvertently enters into the debate over the degree to which metaphorical concepts emerge from sensory experiences common to all humans or are culturally contingent.

On the one hand, proponents of the conceptual theory of metaphor contend that, inasmuch as conceptual metaphors are based on sensory and physical experiences, most metaphorical concepts are universal (bearing in mind that the leading experts on the conceptual theory of metaphor are cognitive linguists). For example, the conceptual theory of metaphor presumes that all humans intrinsically experience locomotion in a way that involves walking in a forward direction. This observation leads Lakoff and Turner (1989) to conclude that humans conceptualize the progress of their life in terms of forward movement, as in the conceptual metaphor *LIFE IS A JOURNEY*. Indeed, in his essay one of Onuf’s main ideas is that modernity is expressed metaphorically in terms *going* someplace, presumably in a forward direction. In making this observation, Onuf would seem to be implicitly accepting Lakoff and Turner’s conceptual metaphor of *LIFE IS A JOURNEY* manifested in the way people think of the passage of time moving in a forward direction.

On the other hand, there are scholars of metaphor who challenge the assumption that experientially-based conceptual metaphors represent essential and universal human experiences, arguing instead for a theory of metaphor which acknowledges the cultural contexts of metaphorical concepts (see, for example, Gibbs 1999). Keeping with metaphors of movement, it has been observed that Aboriginal Australians experience the passage of time not as forward motion but as moving freely about in space. Aboriginal Australians

thus use different metaphors of movement to express the passage of time (Sharifian 2014). This has led scholars to challenge some of the assumptions of the conceptual theory of metaphors and instead argue in favor of cultural linguistics. In his discussion of story tellers shaping community discourse using metaphorical frames Onuf would appear to be agreeing more with the thesis in cultural linguistics that metaphors are socially constructed (or ‘embedded’ as he writes) rather than reflective of universal human experiences, but it would be worth pursuing this more fully so as to be more explicit about his intent.

Metaphors and Foucault

Combining the debates over conceptual versus deliberate metaphors and whether metaphors represent universal human experiences versus cultural contingency allows for an assessment of Onuf’s evocation of Foucault in evaluating how metaphors construct modernity. On the one hand, Foucault’s perspective to some extent seems at odds with the conceptual theory of metaphor favored by many if not most cognitive linguists. Cognitive linguists tend to see metaphors as more or less inevitable products of humans’ physical experiences. Moreover, even if we take theories of cultural linguistics seriously and acknowledge that Aboriginal Australians conceive of the passage of time in ways that are different from people in other parts of the world, metaphors of moving freely through space as opposed to in a forward direction are still metaphors of *movement*. Even if one acknowledges what has been observed about Aboriginal Australians’ conceptualization of motion, there would seem to be something essential in how metaphors are used at their broadest level to comprehend abstract concepts.

Yet for Foucault, nothing is essential, or at the very least, inevitable. One could argue from a Foucaultian perspective that metaphors are ‘deployed’ (using Onuf’s term) to uphold systems of power/knowledge. So in the first analysis it might be fair to say that by evoking Foucault, Onuf has placed himself at odds with two of the major trends in metaphor analysis—the conceptual theory of metaphor, and metaphor analysis which sees metaphors as mostly reflective of universal human experiences. Onuf’s Foucaultian perspective would thus seem to suggest that metaphors are more properly understood as rhetorical and discursive tools, residing in a cultural context, and deliberately employed to frame modernity in ways that reinforce behaviour embedded in existing practices shaped by systems of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980).

And yet, it is possible to conceive of a Foucaultian approach that can be reconciled with large bodies of metaphor analysis as they have developed in academic circles. I would argue that inasmuch as Foucault’s philosophy relied on a theory of possibilities, what is possible for humans to conceive of metaphorically depends on what metaphorical concepts are available at any given time. In his personal life and his academic work Foucault tested the range of physical experiences from which humans could derive a range of sensory reactions. Foucault’s pursuits were both analytical and transgressive in nature. Lessons learned from personal experiences ultimately could be used to transform humans’ understanding of physical and social contexts. Exploration of the unknown could uncover new ways of conceptualizing the world and transforming it, through

action and speech. Experience and deliberation are not at odds with each other but mutually reinforcing.

Metaphors of modernity

For the most part I have been commenting more on theoretical issues involving metaphor analysis than the content of the metaphors the essay examines as they pertain to modernity, although in my observations above I do delve into the specifics of those metaphors, specifically, the metaphor of modernity as ‘going’ somewhere, i.e., in a forward direction. In these final comments I examine the content of the metaphors Onuf evokes to assess notions of modernity. Among the seven metaphors that comprise the bulk of Onuf’s essay analysis, five of them would appear to be related to the aforementioned underlying metaphor of *going*, specifically, the metaphors of break, juncture, rupture, stage, and transition. To the extent that humans experience movement in a forward direction—Lakoff and Turner’s *LIFE IS A JOURNEY*—breaks, junctures, ruptures, stages, and transition could all be seen as points along a journey of forward movement. So in many ways what is presented in the article is a single conceptual metaphor of forward motion with several linguistic metaphors cited as expressions of the underlying conceptual metaphor.

The metaphorical concept of forward movement associated with progress itself is worthy of more extensive theoretical analysis. The MetaNet Metaphor Wiki maintained by the International Computer Science Institute identifies *PROGRESSING THROUGH LIFE IS MOVING THROUGH A TERRAIN* as both a source and target subcase of the conceptual metaphor of *PROGRESS IS FORWARD MOTION ALONG A PATH* which itself is an entailment of the metaphorical concept of *PURPOSEFUL ACTION IS SELF-PROPELLED MOTION TO A DESTINATION* (International Computer Science Institute, no date). In political discourse, the idea of ‘progress’ emanates from these notions that forward motion is associated with achieving positive results, and hence with improving political, economic, cultural, and societal conditions. Ideological positions across the political spectrum have been branded with the label of ‘progressive’ so as to suggest that adoption of these positions will result in the betterment of society. In a recent example from the United States, the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton in 2016 used a visual metaphor of the letter ‘H’ with the crossbar fashioned as an arrow pointed to the right (since English is read left-to-right) in order to send the message that the candidate stood for moving ‘forward’ and making ‘progress’ towards an improved future.

The article’s conclusions would thus be enhanced by examining how the metaphors of break, juncture, rupture, stage, and transition extend the logic of the larger conceptual metaphor of *PROGRESS IS FORWARD MOTION ALONG A PATH* and its related metaphorical concepts mentioned above. As Onuf suggests, the development of modernity is thought to be desirable precisely because it emanates from the concept of progress. To the extent progress towards modernity is metaphorically interrupted by ‘breaks’ and ‘ruptures,’ for example, one might hypothesise that this causes a certain degree of anxiety among members of society. By contrast, metaphorical ‘junctures,’ ‘stages,’ and ‘transitions’ could be seen as opportunities to make modernity fit more closely with society’s notion of what

constitutes 'progress,' which is to say, an improved future. There are many opportunities to research how metaphorical concepts indicate changing human attitudes as people *experience* modernity as a series of sensory inputs shaping their ideas about what constitutes 'progress.'

The other two metaphors in the list of seven—'boundary' and 'limit'—can be seen as linguistic metaphors reflective of another underlying conceptual metaphor, specifically the metaphorical concept of A STATE IS A CONTAINER. The conceptual metaphor of A STATE IS A CONTAINER is one that has been explored at great length and in some detail by scholars such as Paul Chilton (1996).³³ Onuf does to some extent explore the nature of the metaphor of A STATE IS A CONTAINER in his discussion of Walker's (1993) analysis of international relations in terms of a metaphorical relationship between 'inside' and 'outside.' I would suggest that the conceptual metaphor of A STATE IS A CONTAINER could be addressed more explicitly in terms of how the linguistic metaphors of 'boundary' and 'limit' extend how modernity is understood in relation to the modern state.

In the realm of international relations, the metaphor of A STATE IS A CONTAINER finds expression in the way that state sovereignty has come to be associated with territorial integrity. In elaborating on the metaphor of A STATE IS A CONTAINER Peter Taylor (1994) has observed that the state has come to be seen in variously as a 'power container,' a 'wealth container,' a 'cultural container,' and a 'social container.' Territoriality as a basis for political sovereignty is not inevitable. Agnew (1994) points out that feudal forms of political organization do not require a territorial basis. Moreover, territoriality associated with political sovereignty can be utilised by governments as a way of scaring citizens into seeking out the protection of the state against presumed foreign threats (Connolly 1995). The metaphor of A STATE IS A CONTAINER reinforces the notion that the safety and security of individuals depends on the ability of governments to uphold the territorial integrity of the state. This territorial integrity involves both literal boundaries and limits as well as metaphorical representations of a physically enclosed political space.

Inasmuch as Onuf identifies metaphorical 'boundaries' and 'limits' associated with the concept of modernity, the obvious next analytical step is to connect the development of modernity with the development of the territorial state. The irony is that modernity frequently is associated with processes of globalisation which presumably entail the erosion of strict territorial boundaries enclosing contained and intact states. Globalising trends reveal that the strict distinction between international relations on the outside and domestic politics on the inside is giving way to politics that are 'intermeshed' (Pratto, et.al. 2014). Thus, the notion of modernity with 'limits' and 'boundaries' suggests any number of questions regarding how historically bounded states, but with increasingly eroded territorial limits, contend with a world with potentially boundless and unlimited advances in modern communication, technology, and transportation. Do metaphors of 'boundaries' and 'limits' constrain modernization, or do they illustrate the futility of holding on to territorially enclosed political authority? This is a question worth pursuing.

Concluding thoughts

Onuf's essay demonstrates that in order to understand a concept such as modernity one needs first to have a theory of *concepts*. In order to *conceive* of modernity, one needs to understand modernity as a metaphorical construction, one of the thousands of conceptual metaphors that emerge from the human experience. Onuf has shown that, as with many aspects of the human life span, modernity is experienced as forward motion, with all the promise for positive outcomes that forward motion implies. Modernity is also metaphorically imagined as having physical contours, similar to and inextricably tied to changing notions of the physical boundaries of territorially-defined political authority. As my comments suggest, there are still opportunities to refine Onuf's analysis, but he has provided a useful and insightful starting point.

I am grateful to the editors of this journal for the opportunity to publish my thoughts on the metaphorical tendencies in the way *we* talk about modernity. I take the *we* in question to be anyone reading these pages, and I take modernity to be the social condition making these pages even possible. I am further grateful that the editors are publishing four commentaries on my thoughts, here and elsewhere, about the way we moderns talk. Finally, I am grateful to be able to respond to those four commentaries, to clarify my thoughts, account for lapses and deficiencies, and defend a stance that has taken shape over many decades.

‘Stance’ is a familiar metaphor, suggesting that I see myself standing somewhere, standing firm—a self-sketched human figure. More than this, I recognize myself in what I (and others) write: ‘A figure in the shape of writing’ (Foucault 1983: 23). ‘Figure’ is an exceptionally versatile metaphor, one that traces back through Latin (form, shape; beauty; image, appearance; kind, nature, quality) to the proto-Indo-European **dheigh-* (to form, build). Its value for anyone with constructivist sympathies should be obvious. A few years ago, I adopted it in ‘reconfiguring’ Michel Foucault, as two commentaries document; the figure whom we call Foucault was already notorious for having identified the advent of modernity with that ‘strange figure of knowledge called man’ (1970: xxvi). Foucault figures in all four commentaries and my response. So do the strange properties of the modern world, only some of which shaped Foucault’s writing. Reconfiguration is a general, constitutive process; hence the title I have attached to this commentary on four commentaries reconfiguring the way I talk about the way we talk about modernity.

Of course the four commentaries also have authors and titles. I am especially grateful to Victor Coutinho Lage, Manuela Trindade Viana, Roberto (Beto) Vilchez Yamato, and *Michael Marks* for writing them. Victor, Manuela and Beto are dear friends from my long association with the Instituto de Relações Internacionais, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, where they were doctoral students. I have never met Michael, but we are well-acquainted with each other’s work; in emails, we address each other informally.

In these pages, however, I treat them all as figures shaped in the first instance by their commentaries. Doing so, I reconfigure what they say without asking them what they (think they) mean, without acknowledging our personal ties or wider concerns. This is generally what happens when we write. In this case, the process is so clumsy and impersonal that I mark it by using their initials: VCL, MTV, RVY, and MM. I remain I; it is evasive and even clumsier to depersonalize the process of reconfiguring one’s self.

Beginnings

I begin with VCL’s commentary. Its subtitle, ‘A Reconfiguration of Nick Onuf’s Constructivism,’ inspires my return to *figure* as a fertile metaphor and thus the title that

I have chosen for this commentary. It also reminds me of long conversations in my Rio office, where we scraped and shaped the rough edges of each other's perspective on late modern thought. VCL's commentary is much concerned with beginnings. When he writes, 'setting beginnings is an act that has no absolute, originary ground' (p. 13), I unreservedly agree with him. My book *World of Our Making* (1989) begins with a page quoting a number of lines (fourteen, actually) from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (1976: 62):

It is written 'In the beginning was the word!'
Already I have to stop. Who'll help me on?
...
All at once, I see the answer
And write confidently, 'In the beginning was the deed.'

With this passage (fortuitously omitted from the 2013 reprint), I began *my* story about the language turn, social constructivism, and their relevance to International Relations (IR) as a field of study. Every story begins and ends as a matter of course; every beginning is a deed. All at once, I saw the answer in a long quest to escape the manifest parochialism of my chosen field of study.

- (1) Make deeds the place to begin;
- (2) claim that speaking and writing are deeds in themselves and not just representations of deeds elsewhere undertaken;
- (3) link speech, rules, and the conditions of rule in *any* society;
- (4) dispatch the term *anarchy* because it grossly misrepresents the ensemble of deeds conventionally called international relations;
- (5) demonstrate that there is indeed an international society, albeit with some unusual features;
- (6) conclude that rules and rule in *every* society enable some people to exploit other people.

It is a complicated story. Accused, no doubt rightly, of not making it accessible to my readers, I sought to rectify this failing some years later (Onuf 1998). VCL, however, knows the story exceedingly well. He is fully aware of the many ways that I have amended and extended it. In recapitulating the whole story, he identifies two 'central beginnings' (p. 4). First is 'rationality; or "the gift of speech"' (pp. 4-5); second is 'modern world; or "old ontologies never die"' (pp. 6-8). He then offers a running critique, followed by a substantial if sympathetic reconfiguration.

First, rationality. Implicit in *deed* as a naturalized metaphor (deriving from the Proto-Indo-European root **dhe-*, to set, place, put) is choice. VCL summarizes my position better than I could: 'Recall that making choices is a fundamental capacity for one to be defined as an agent, therefore as a rational human being capable of exercising powers and carrying forward goals in ruled settings, that is, in social arrangements' (p. 5).

Rational conduct is making choices, one after the other. Individual human beings do it—and only they—with the skills and tools that come with social life and linguistic competence. We need thresholds to transcend the rolling present. We make them up as we go along, we find them everywhere: here and there; now and then; may, must; could, should. No threshold, no choice.

When VCL quotes Jacques Derrida on our ‘irrepressible desire’ for thresholds (p. 13), I applaud, then have a look at this text. It calls on us to ‘rethink the very figure of the *threshold*’ (Derrida 2009: 333; emphasis in translation). Ah, rethink it. This we do, constantly. Threshold is a necessary *figure*, an inevitable metaphor in any community of human households—ever refreshed, always fit.

Whether we ‘really’ have free choice is not the point, nowhere to begin. We think we do; we act as if we do. *That* is where I begin my story. Nor is the point ‘rational choice’ in the narrow sense of good, bad, biased, or optimal choices. That is where I found myself, after crossing many thresholds, in *World of Our Making*, near the end of a long, complicated story.

VCL would say: Long story about the modern world—this being the second of his central beginnings. Rationality defines the experience of modernity and summarizes Enlightenment values. The two beginning are closely related, ever more obviously as I have episodically reconfigured my story. Even if I do not begin by saying so, my story is suffused with the values, assumptions, and commitments of the European Enlightenment. Nor did I realize for quite some time how much I rely on Max Weber’s two-phase model of modernity. In Jürgen Habermas’s terms, the first phase (disenchantment) culminated in the Enlightenment quest for universal principles grounded in reason and the second phase (rationalization) transformed the world through the systematic use of instrumental reason (here paraphrasing Onuf 2023: 110–11). In Foucault’s terms, the classical age more or less matches the age of reason, while the modern age, marked as it is by ‘an analytic of finitudes’ (1970: 340–7), fosters the rationalization of society.

In *my* terms, reasoning and principled conduct are human universals, evident in the disposition to offer reasons for whatever we do. For any number of reasons, an analytic attitude and the systematic use of instrumental reason are *not* universal features of human life. Along with the ‘reflexive monitoring of action’ (Anthony Giddens’ modernity-marker; 1990: 37), they give modernity some of its most distinctive features. Life, humanity, and modernity are improbable causal conjunctures with unparalleled consequences. Some of those consequences are magnificent, some malignant, some terrifying. Many we take for granted; others we gratuitously generalize.

We who are modern are generally aware that the modern world is unlike any other. Often enough we say that we have escaped tradition. All too often, we treat those who are beholden to tradition as if they are children. We call them backward. We bathe tradition in nostalgia, we celebrate brand new traditions, we contrast tradition with modernity’s forward momentum, we dress up modernity with metaphors of growth and movement (as I say in ‘Metaphoricizing Modernity’). Rarely do we acknowledge the excesses committed in the name of universal reason, everyday conduct at odds with

anyone's conception of rationality, routine disregard for life, humanity, other selves. We think we can fix anything, everything.

In short: 'Modernity rests on an apparent contradiction. Human beings think alike, yet we moderns think differently' (Onuf 2018a: 52; see generally 52-7). Over time, I have made a considerable effort to explore this contradiction. VCL gives me some credit for trying to resolve it but sees me trapped within its terms. In his terms, I am insufficiently radical. I should be careful here. It is my story, not me and my values, to which he offers a critique (p. 13). However bold the constructivism that I have made my story, it is not bold enough, not radical enough. The frame of reference for this judgment is postmodern and postcolonial scepticism about the legacy of the Enlightenment (p. 5).

Fair enough. Much as I am attracted to postmodern scholarship, my commitments are such that I can never escape the contradiction between fixed claims about universal human faculties and contestable claims about modernity's distinctive character—if indeed there is a contradiction. VCL suggests that refreshing 'the centre/periphery metaphor' might do the job (p. 13). For similar reasons, RVY suggests that I fully, finally 'provincialize' my work. Sceptical in turn, I will say more about any such reconfiguration, but only after I consider two important points that MTV's commentary brings to the table.

Building words

MTV begins her commentary by recalling my penchant, in the classroom, for pointing out why it matters that we talk about states '*as if* they were persons—Brazil *thinks*; the United States *provokes*; China *declares*' (p. 2). She associates this practice, quite rightly, with methodological nationalism. Scholars fall prey to it when

they invoke a humanized personality to explanations of state behavior in world politics, encapsulating, in a single national territory, a homogeneous conduct whose understanding could be facilitated by its approximation towards the idea of a modern subject, with reason, freedom and choice among its main traits. (p. 2)

I am not at all sure that bestowing personality upon institutions is a specifically modern practice. Consider Rome: 'the Republic,' 'the Empire,' 'the Church.' I do think scholars carelessly mimic general speech patterns when they talk this way. More to the point, MTV has identified a complex, highly consequential process by which we moderns make the world metaphorically modern. I had never thought about it before; possibly others have. Colombia and 'Colombianization' illustrate the point.

In Latin, *columba* is a female pigeon or dove, *columbus* a male. Metaphoricized, *columba* stands in for peace and gentleness. There was an Italian seaman named in Italian Cristoforo Colombo, in Spanish Cristóbal Colón. After his voyages to the 'New World,' his name was Latinized by English speakers, and then frequently depersonalized, feminized, and rendered abstractly heroic by substituting '-ia' for '-us': Republic of Colombia, Province of British Columbia, District of Columbia, Columbia University. Bearing such names, institutions became august persons functioning as agents with formal

powers of their own, often identified with women in flowing robes (see the great seals of the Republic of Colombia and Columbia University). Dignified by myth, history and fanciful images, these names acquire all-purpose metaphorical power. 'Colombia' names a people in place (one-to-one relation, whole for whole). Duly constituted (and named), the people (as a whole) name the government and grant its powers; thus empowered, the government (as a named part of the whole) acts in Colombia's name. Synecdoche and metonymy support the metaphor (Colombia personified) in this durable figuration. Colombia is what Colombia does.

In many cases the process ends here. In others, a second process picks up and reinforces the first. In it, nouns and adjectives with Greek and Latin roots are given a suffix—in English, *-ise* or *-ize* (from the Greek *-izein*, Latin *-izare*)—to form a new verb, often intransitive and generally indicating that something happens to the object it modifies. We modernize, conceptualize, metaphoricize: people become modern; metaphors become concepts; metaphors that had become concepts become metaphors again—but not the *same* metaphors. This process is so conventionalized (standardized, naturalized) that we speakers participate in it effortlessly; by my count, the paper inspiring these commentaries uses this verb-form sixteen times. Nor is this where the process ends.

On many occasions, we turn our new verbs into nouns that seem to take on lives of their own—a self-sustaining complex of activities, at least some of them deliberately undertaken. Becoming modern is to modernize; 'metaphorizing modernity' describes this tendency to make what we do into wholes with history, to which we impute causal sufficiency interpreted as purpose. The result is a compound Latinate substantive, a metaphor for something that has many moving parts, a model of how some wholes get made: modernization, conceptualization, civilization, Westphalianization, Colombianization. The possibilities are endless, however awkward they can sound when first encountered, however modern the context for their emergence.

MTV's telling account of 'Colombianization' begins with 'Colombia' as a metaphor for the problem of violence in Latin America (p. 4), which she attributes to experts in security policy understood as a community of speakers; lost is any sense of peace or tranquility. By the late 2000s, this metaphor 'came to be crystallized' as Colombianization—'a commoditized representation of violence' (p. 4). MTV's word choices support my claims about an extended, informal process by which metaphors simultaneously acquire formality and currency within and beyond a community of speakers. Metaphorical crystals become 'crystallized' and 'commoditized' to give Colombianization its power in grabbing public attention and diverting resources to security professionals in a number of countries. By emphasizing formalization in the process of metaphoricization (note my word choices), MTV's complex Latinate metaphors suit a complex process in which knotted threads produce ever more elaborate metaphors in recursive patterns. Such is the fabric of our social arrangements.

MTV tells the story of Colombianization because my choice of metaphors troubles her. More to the point, the metaphors I use to show how metaphors work, 'the vivid image of refreshment,' has the effect of valorizing not just my choices but metaphors more generally. By implication I end up supporting 'politically useful narrow-mindedness'

(p. 8) as a chronic condition in the modern world. I have to agree with her on this point, given the case of Colombianization and, I don't doubt, many other similarly ornate, formalized, floating metaphors. Generalizing, she offers 'erasure and repression in opposition to the enabling effects of metaphors valorized in Onuf's analysis' (p. 3).

Here I have my doubts. In the ordinary sense of the term, *erasing* something makes it disappear. What I do not remember is, for the most part, simply erased. Lost for good, it cannot be recovered without some sort of assistance. Sometimes we repress our memories. In composing this commentary, I have deleted hundreds of words and dozens of metaphors in hopes of saying something fresh and fitting. I can consult the text that remains; it remembers for me. Once it is preserved, disseminated and discussed, repressing it is rarely worth the trouble. It is far more likely to be misremembered and misrepresented, indexed and filed away. I can be erased, my texts not so readily. What a community of speakers does with them is another matter.

Post-modernity

In coupling erasure and repression, MTV implies that rising, refreshed metaphors wipe out their predecessors. Colombianization has us forgetting Colombia and its many metaphorical manifestations—peaceful, heroic and violent. Those Colombias no longer exist, at least for the security community. Yet erasure as a favoured metaphor among post-modern scholars suggests something radically different. Following Martin Heidegger, Derrida made '*rature*' (in English, erasure) an inaccurate if necessary procedure: 'write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion' (Derrida 1976: xiv, quoting 'Translator's Preface').

If we apply this procedure to Colombia as a metaphorical sequence, we get this: ~~Columba~~ (in Latin, dove) Colombo (in Italian, a name); ~~Colombo~~ (an Italian name) Colón (a Spanish name, but not for dove); ~~Colón~~ (a Spanish name) Colombia (a dignified name for a modern state); ~~Colombia~~ (a dignified name) Colombia (a site for run-away violence); ~~Colombia~~ (as a violent site) Colombianization (as a regional business activity); ~~Colombianization~~ (as a business activity) critical discussion of Colombianization . . . Step by step, some content is lost, some added. Valence creeps in. Reverberations attenuate, but irregularly. Reversals and inversions pop up. Registers shift, resonances multiply. Formalization sets in, normativity shows up in signposting, conceptualization takes off in different directions. Layers of meaning accumulate.

As Derrida's translator, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, concluded, 'our very language is twisted and bent even as it guides us. Writing "under erasure" is the mark of this contortion' (Derrida 1976: xiv; see generally pp. xiii-xx). And, I would add, Derrida's procedure is so inconvenient that we routinely dispense with it. When we do, we forget that metaphors acquire histories. The more ornate they become, the more modern they seem; seemingly modern, the deeper their roots in the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, antiquity, distant worlds and hazy Indo-European origins, language as a human universal of extraordinary plasticity.

Derrida does not figure in MTV's commentary; the figure of Foucault signposts her postmodern stance on the repressive use of language. VCL holds up Derrida as my signpost for what's 'too radical.' Stuck too comfortably in an empty centre, I am unable or unwilling to acknowledge 'colonial differences' (p. 12, quoting Mignolo 2012: xxv), and 'lived experience' on the periphery (p. 13). To re-begin, he would have me refresh 'the centre/periphery metaphor' (p. 13). He also knows that I would probably resist a fresh start along these lines, since I have already declared myself hostile (p. 18, citing Onuf 2013); his brief remarks drawing on Foucault do nothing to change my mind. In my view, it is the elementary geometry of a perfect circle in two dimensions that resists enrichment.

In making the case for the centre-periphery metaphor, VCL draws on Walter Mignolo's important work. 'Yesterday the colonial difference was out there, away from the center. Today it is all over, in the peripheries of the center and in the centers of the periphery' (2012: xxv). Exactly. The spatial metaphor is so scrambled that Mignolo offers 'local histories' and 'global designs' as an alternative metaphorical pairing. In a passage VCL also quotes, Mignolo directed attention to 'the space in which global designs have to be adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored' (p. xxv). This metaphorical space could be anywhere, because modernity confronts and subverts local knowledge everywhere.

Mignolo's alternative is useful scaffolding for my own sense of modernity's shifting relation to colonial experience. VCL is well aware of the importance I attach to republicanism as an ancient political program recovered along with so much else in the Renaissance, highlighted in Enlightenment thought, adopted in a great many postcolonial settings, linked to procedural democracy, subordinated to liberalism as modernity's reigning ideology, and perhaps undergoing a modest revival. It is hard to imagine a better example of the many ways that local histories have dealt with global design—all over the world and for the entire history of modernity. I have to wonder how many postcolonial scholars have granted the experience of the early American republics, *as republics*, the close consideration they deserve.

Traditional socio-political designs are always being 'adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored' (Mignolo, just quoted). To say that every society has a 'centre' as if that centre were an optimal design or fixed condition, is simply mistaken. I have long argued that modernity never rid itself of status-ordering, notwithstanding the best efforts of the Enlightenment's global designers. VCL gives this stance sustained discussion, rightly seeing the persistence of 'stratification' as integral to my 'republican story' (pp. 8-10, quoting p. 8). Stratification and status-order are spatial metaphors. Adding a third dimension to the centre-periphery metaphor, thereby turning a circle into a cone (stacked circles, each smaller than the one below), they vastly enrich its value in showing how socio-political designs work in practice (see further Onuf 2023: ch. 3).

Motivating VCL's and MTV's commentaries is a deep concern over the obliteration of local stories. They attribute this widespread, recurring, catastrophic event to modernization as a global process, and behind it, modernity's universal ethos. RVY shares this

concern, which he voices by means of a memorable metaphor embedded in the very title of Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2008). Late in the Roman Republic, *provincia* described a public office; in the Empire, an administrative unit for regions far from Rome. Widely adopted for territorial administration in modern states, the term acquired an invidious metaphorical sense of cultural inferiority. Provincials lead provincial lives. Insofar as we moderns have accorded the rest of the world provincial status, provincializing us is metaphorical pay-back, paid through the elaborate process of summoning antiquity that we moderns so often favor (and I described above). Much as we may deserve to be skewered with our own pretensions, Chakrabarty formulated his project more carefully. Its goal is 'to find out how and in what sense European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity' (2008: xiii). The point is *not* to 'pluralize reason' or rid us of 'the idea of universals,' but to show that 'the universal . . . is a highly unstable figure, a necessary placeholder in our attempt to think through questions of modernity' (p. xiii).

I have great sympathy for this undertaking, which I think is reflected in what I have had to say in recent years about modernity and its metaphorical support. Like VCL, RVY would agree, but only up a point. Both contrast the universalizing language in *World of Our Making* with the more specific assessment, years later, of modernity and its mighty frame. VCL would have me re-begin, and I resist because I believe that I have already done so. RVY takes a different tack. He congratulates me on having gone a long way toward provincializing myself, and he would like to help me complete the task. In the process, he provides the best recapitulation of my work that I have ever seen. It is concise yet comprehensive, always attentive to my word choices, stated intentions, latent concerns, and expository strategies. I could not do a better job of it myself.

After this thorough, nuanced review, RVY concludes that I 'disregard the—(post/de/neo-) colonial—*macro-logic* [citation deleted] always already (*pre*)conditioning the possibility not only of the formation but also of the (non-provincializing) universalization and normalization of rules, rule, thought, and language, including its words, concepts, and metaphors' (p. 18, his emphasis). While RVY alludes to this failing at many junctures, he finds it clearly evident in this passage: 'Conditions of thought (manifest in language) eventuate in conditions of rule (actuated through language), thanks to rules (expressed in language). This is the mighty frame for every society, and not just the modern world' (Onuf 2018a: 228).

I think the evidence is a good deal less clear than he does. First, I sketch a model that I devised almost forty years ago, revised over the years, and styled 'the mighty frame' only a few years ago. As a model, it has neither spatial nor temporal referents; it makes no sense to call it local, general, or universal until it is further specified (for more on models, see Onuf 2018a: 88-90). When I go on to say that this model applies to any human society, I announce an empirical generalization without troubling to provide empirical support; by implication, I think I could if I had to. Most models are generalized—their scope stipulated in advance. Finally, I claim that my model applies to 'the modern world' as a particular set of social arrangements, and I show that modernity's mighty frame acquired distinctive

features over several centuries. Even so, the mighty frame remains a model, however localized in space and time.

To be sure, models have designs. Hugo Grotius held there to be a natural law governing human affairs. Revealing God's design (*intentio*), it is universal in scope and accessible by use of reason. This appeal to universal reason (recall the Weberian model of modernity's two phases) still reverberates in Immanuel Kant even as it gives way to acknowledgment that we design rules to suit ourselves. The body of rules called modern international law is local in origin, global in application, and modelled in universal terms. RVY and I have both steeped ourselves in the theory and history of international law. I am sure he would agree that these rules document the rationalization of international society (the second phase in the Weberian model). They reflect what I think Mignolo meant by 'global design,' though weakly, unevenly; I take them to be a necessary but hardly sufficient feature of modernity's mighty frame (Onuf 2018a: 118-22).

To generalize, some few models are designed to be universal in scope. Grotian natural law and Newtonian mechanics are pertinent examples; modern theorists are happy to criticize them for over-reach. Many models are limited by design to some universe of empirical instances; here *universe* is a metaphor for a bounded set or whole, and *empirical* a metaphor derived from the Greek term for what we (think we) experience directly. Many other models suffer from under-specification; they seem to make universal claims or generalize unduly.

My postmodern critics (and not just my dear friends in these pages) find me to have built a model based in that I take to be universal truths and designed it to be universal in scope. In the process, I have valorized universal reason and selectively excluded local knowledge. I disagree. I believe that I have constructed a highly generalized model of world-making, which I take to be applicable in a wide variety of (unspecified) settings. I have applied that model to the modern world as a consequential setting. I concede that I too readily talk in universalizing terms—as so many of us do (a bad habit left over from modernity's first phase).

I have recently acknowledged this tendency (2023: 19), perhaps confirming RVY's hunch that reflexivity can be self-provincializing. I think what I wrote is important enough to bear repeating.

To say that human beings have goals and engage in purposive behavior, that they possess many powers, conspicuously including the power of speech, that language alienates self from world yet makes society possible, that traditional societies depend on status-ordering, that rules betray the presence of rule, that international society is one of a kind, that modernity never succeeded in banishing status, that the modern world cannot be sustained: these are unsupported declarations, not universal truths. As stated, every one of these claims contributes to a whole of many wholes, a model with unambiguous margins. That these claims are unqualified is a property of language in use, a textual artefact, a convenience of the

moment; they function as placeholders, ‘a sort of nonlocus’, awaiting fuller articulation.

‘Nonlocus’ is a deliberately confounding metaphor that I borrowed from Derrida (1978: 280). ‘Placeholder’ is an evocative metaphor that Chakrabarty used in a similar context: ‘the universal . . . is a highly unstable figure, a necessary placeholder in our attempt to think through questions of modernity’ (2008: xiii, quoted above). With this show of postmodern support, I declare myself sufficiently self-provincialized. My inattention to the colonial experience, as if a whole only now understood as such, has no direct relation to modern remnants of universal reason scattered through my work—and the work of even the most committed postmodern scholars.

Ontology, after all

‘Metaphoricizing modernity’ begins with a brief discussion of metaphor as a figure of speech. It is brief for two reasons. The first honours convention. If modernity is my subject, about which there is so much to say, then the way that we use metaphors gives me a fruitful way to say something about the subject. The made-up gerund ‘metaphoricizing’ is merely a tool; scholars typically give their tools brief consideration before they move on to substantive matters. The second reason for such a brief discussion speaks to my personal limitations as a scholar: I know far less about rhetoric and language use, not to mention literary theory, than readers might guess from the way I make unsupported declarations about these subjects.

In this light, MM’s commentary is especially helpful. While the other three commentaries make my stance on modernity their subject, MM shifts the subject to the way I conceptualize metaphors. I should also say that his work on metaphors in international relations (2004, 2011, 2018) makes what I say about metaphors in ‘Metaphoricizing Modernity’ seem dilettantish by comparison. In effect, he moves us from the metaphorical construction of the modern world to the modern (re)construction of metaphors in cognitive linguistics. By doing this, he invigorates my declaration that ‘language alienates self from world yet makes society possible’ (quoted above) and authorizes another effort on my part to demonstrate that language use is always the paramount if implicit subject of my work, that ontology is always where we must begin—and end.

MM would shy away from such grandiose ambitions. He once observed that ‘for the study of metaphors and international relations alike, the effort to arrive at an understanding of “reality” is a metaphysical project not relevant to the task at hand’ (2011: 16). I hold that ‘the metaphysical project’ of dismantling the prevailing, standard, modern understanding of reality is a necessary task for anyone with postmodern sympathies or constructivist inclinations. For MM, the task at hand demands good tools put to proper use (my metaphor, not his; see Onuf 2018b.) I propose to rummage in his toolbox to determine whether I do indeed get lost in the metaphysical wilderness.

One tool we both favour is the concept of concept (as he would say) or concept as metaphor (my preference). Neither of us define *concept* explicitly. Instead, we let its

connotations speak for themselves, but selectively; doing so puts us at odds in crafting our respective stories about metaphors. For both of us, cognition depends on being able to make comparisons. I begin with wholes construed as figures subject to comparison, rendered as metaphors, and construed as concepts. MM begins with the comparison of differentiated parts, which, framed as concepts, produce kinds of metaphors.

Indicatively, MM's toolbox contains five kinds of metaphors, organized into three pairs. Conceptual and deliberate metaphors make up one pair. Aristotle's conceptualization of rhetoric as persuasive speech would seem to make all figures of speech deliberate or intentional—always deployed by design (*intentio*). As MM observes, 'the vast majority of metaphors are used reflexively and without much thought, because they are indeed underlying concepts essential to how the human brain operates' (p. 5). They are indeed, and not just because we are always making comparisons. In my view, it is because speech is *always* performative as well as representational. It is persuasive by intention, even if we (any one of us) are never fully aware of our intentions.

Any metaphor is available for rhetorical use. Depending on circumstances, some metaphors work better than others for persuasive purposes. When MM says that 'any deliberate use of these metaphors [meaning 'the vast majority'] is not necessarily for the purposes of persuasion, but simply to accentuate what people already comprehend' (p. 5), I think he is wrong, or at least misleading, on two counts. For speakers, intention and deliberate use are matters of degree; accentuation is persuasion to a lesser degree. Comprehension is also a matter of degree. Much speech is intended to fix more firmly what we, as auditors, already believe. The very process of sharing our beliefs is collectively reassuring. Yet the process inevitably revises what each of us has in mind, whether by reinforcing or undercutting, simplifying or complicating, what we think we know about the world.

In short, the degree to which any metaphor is deliberately chosen for effect is 'an empirical question' (his words, Abstract, p. 5; mine too). Conceptually more important is his second pairing, which contrasts conceptual metaphors and linguistic metaphors. 'Linguistic metaphors are, as the term implies, linguistic expressions of underlying metaphorical concepts. Which is to say, conceptual metaphors precede linguistic metaphors' (p. 3).

That *metaphor* (a Greek term) and *transfer* (a Latin term) have the same Proto-Indo-European root (**bher-* 'to carry') might suggest that the mode by which any transfer of meaning takes place need not be linguistic. Many road signs are figurative; they use simplified images to express conceptual content. I don't think MM means just this, and I wouldn't quarrel with him if he did. He does seem to think that many cognitive processes do not depend on language (he's right) and that conceptualization is, or can be, one such process (and here I think he's wrong). In my view, the prefix *con-* (with, together) is an emphatic reminder that concepts depend on *common* expression. By definition, there are no private concepts; as Ludwig Wittgenstein famously held, there is no private language—however private our thoughts may be.

If I am right about this, concepts cannot precede their public expression. MM suspects that I hold the contrary view that 'metaphors create concepts' (p. 4). I do not. Neither comes first because they are two aspects of the same phenomenon. Metaphors

give the appearance of becoming concepts over time because of the way people use them—more precisely, express them publicly after hearing or seeing others using them. It remains pertinent to ask where they come from. MM's answer is straightforward. They are already in the brain, as concepts. It is 'the way the human brain operates' (quoted above). My answer has to do with the way many human brains operate when they are linked through language.

Sensory faculties produce electrical patterns in any given brain's neural circuits. Some of these *impressions* (the metaphor that I find most fitting) will cause a wide variety of bodily responses. Some few of them will be stored. Even fewer are subject to comparison with other impressions brought out of storage for the purpose. As a cognitive operation, comparison depends on some kind of language, whether natural, symbolic, graphic, or tonal.

Individual brains can perform this operation only because they store a language enabling them to form a simplified impression, or model, that other brains are capable of recognizing and repeating. Once other brains are involved in the process, comparison takes off. Depending the speed and extent of the process, the standardizing effects of the language used, the degree of simplification, and the degree to which Aristotelian criteria of fit and freshness are satisfied, what is publicly expressed will look like metaphors, concepts, or something in between—that is, MM's conceptual metaphors. They come out of people's mouths all the time, they never stay the same. No beginning is ever pristine. Social construction is an ongoing, language-dominated process marked by familiar frames and fresh initiatives.

As I suggested earlier, MM has steeped himself in a fresh initiative called cognitive linguistics, from which he lifts the concept of conceptual metaphor as one kind of metaphors (*lift* is my metaphor, no negative connotation intended). Among the scholars participating in this conceptual re-beginning are George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner, for whom, in MM's words, 'conceptual metaphors start out with physical experiences' (p. 3). I suggest this unadorned claim should be put in context. Cognitive linguistics starts off with a fresh and appealing ontological stance called 'embodied realism.' Lakoff and Johnson gave this stance a metaphorical boost when they titled a major statement *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999).

What they have in mind deserves repeating at some length.

Subjectivism in its various forms—radical relativism and social constructionism—also fails to explain color, since color is created jointly by our biology and the world, not by our culture. This is not to say that color does not differ in its significance from culture to culture. It clearly does. Rather, color is a function of the world and our biology interacting.

Philosophically, color and color concepts make sense only in something like an embodied realism, a form of interactionism that is neither purely objective nor purely subjective. Color is also important for the 'realism' of embodied realism. Evolution has

worked with physical limitations: only certain wavelengths of light get through the atmosphere, only certain chemicals react to short, medium, and long wavelengths, and so on. We have evolved within these limitations to have the color systems we have, and they allow us to function well in the world. (1999: 33)

In general terms, I quite agree with this assessment of colour, biology, evolution and world—all familiar metaphors fruitfully linked. Lakoff and Johnson held their stance to be ‘a form of interactionism that is neither purely objective nor purely subjective.’ I take it to be a revival of 19th century phenomenism, with a healthy emphasis on sensory experience. And I hold that social constructionism/constructivism is, or should be construed in just this way, but with a proviso: what we think we know about the world depends on being able to assign words to colours (and everything else) and then on talking with each other about our colourful world.

I have always wondered why Lakoff and Johnson never said something along these lines. Perhaps they took it for granted. Or social constructionism is ‘too radical’ for them. Or ultra-realist cognitive science swamped their linguistic investigations. In any event, I might be inclined to label my own stance ‘embodied anti-realism.’ I take reality to be what we say about the world *collectively*. What we say mediates, and is mediated by, the way the world appears to us *individually* (for explication, see Onuf 2018a: 12-28, Onuf 2023: 8-19). Bodies, sensory experience, human cognitive faculties, language, and society all contribute to *reality* as a primary metaphor: that which we individually experience as real is real for us all. Old ontologies never die; like metaphors, they just layer up.

I hesitate to use the expression *primary metaphor* in this general way because cognitive linguists have given it a more specific meaning, thanks to Joseph Grady, who introduced this usage in 1997. Again I quote Lakoff and Johnson: ‘We acquire a large system of primary metaphors automatically and unconsciously simply by functioning in the most ordinary of ways in the everyday world from our earliest years’ (1999: 51). Grady produced a list of 23 such metaphors. I myself offered a list three times longer: 23 orientation metaphors, 23 bodily metaphors, and 23 metaphors about bodies in the plural (Onuf 2010: 268). It was easy. I realized then that one could find a large number of such metaphors and invent many more. I see now that this eventuality would make the conceptual system for sorting them primary. Any such ‘system’ would itself be a metaphorical construction.

In discussing primary metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson work their way from ‘[u]niversal early experiences’ to ‘universal (or widespread) conventional conceptual metaphors’ (1999: 51). MM does not identify primary metaphors by kind. Nonetheless, his third pairing of kinds is clearly indebted to this way of thinking. Some metaphors ‘reflect universal experiences’; others are ‘socially constructed within a cultural context’ (p. 6).

Neither formulation quite suits me. I would say: Yes, there are universal early experiences—embodied, sensory. These experiences are socially mediated from the beginning and expressed in language as we become language users. Yes, many metaphors end up as concepts because they are conventionalized through use. *Widespread* is an apt metaphor.

Yes, cultures greatly vary, and so do favoured metaphors within communities of language users. Metaphors exhibit a variety of properties, often revealed in their histories, affecting their relevance and reception.

More than this, I want to acknowledge the dangers in generalizing, the care needed in talk about universals. The metaphors that we moderns favour constitute a pretentious conceptual vocabulary, one that reinforces longstanding, widespread, prejudicial social arrangements. Most of all, I am compelled to say, one more time, we never seem to escape our proprietary sense of reality. Our sensory experiences invest our metaphors with the appearance of truth, our metaphors fill the world the same way for all of us. It is our world, a world we share. So we say, so we want to believe.

Last words

Every figure is a reconfiguration. In this text reside five figures reconfiguring themselves, each other, many others, the world: through metaphorical deployment, ‘in the shape of writing.’ Foucault’s lecture inaugurating his tenure at the Collège de France, translated as ‘The Discourse on Language,’ is a key text in the linguistic turn half a century ago. I read it again recently. One passage struck me (a primary metaphor, if ever there were one).

If philosophy is memory or a return of the origin, what I am doing cannot, in any way, be regarded as philosophy; and if the history of thought consists in giving life to half-effaced figures, what I am doing is not history either. (1972: Appendix, 206)

Foucault’s sharply figured ‘I’ shapes the figure that I have become.

Notes

- 1 [Note by Marks] Notice that I am using the convention among cognitive linguists of denoting a conceptual metaphor with small capital letters.
- 2 [Note by Marks] Hence, George Orwell (1953) (cited by Onuf), whose life pre-dates the development of the conceptual theory of metaphors, got things in reverse when he claimed that metaphors create concepts. The conceptual theory of metaphors contends that it is the other way around.
- 3 [Note by Marks] I elaborate on some of Chilton's theme in Marks (2004).

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Intercâmbio sobre ‘Metaphoricizing Modernity’ de Nick Onuf, Parte III – Reconfiguração da Modernidade e/ou como Metáfora(s)

Resumo: Neste Dossiê, quatro acadêmicos refletem sobre o artigo de Nicholas Onuf, ‘Metaphoricizing modernity’, retornando – e celebrando – de forma mais ampla o inovador trabalho de Onuf a partir de diferentes lugares, perspectivas e ângulos. A Parte III dedica-se a reconfigurações da Modernidade e/ou como metáfora(s), incluindo uma extensa e cuidadosa resposta de Onuf a esses quatro acadêmicos e suas (re)leituras publicadas no *Dossiê: Celebrando Nicholas Onuf*. Michael Marks é o quarto acadêmico a refletir sobre o artigo de Onuf e seu trabalho de forma mais ampla. Marks lê o ensaio de Onuf sobre a metaforização da modernidade como um convite para (re)vê-la em termos de suas qualidades metafóricas, ou seja, como uma oportunidade de refletir não apenas sobre a modernidade, mas também sobre a natureza das metáforas e como elas aparecem na pesquisa acadêmica. Mais especificamente, para ele, a caracterização de Onuf da modernidade, como incorporando noções de movimento progressivo e fisicalidade territorial, é um dos principais insights de seu ensaio que poderia ser mais explorado com uma análise teórica adicional. Nicholas Onuf encerra esta Parte e o Dossiê, como um todo, retornando e cuidadosamente respondendo às contribuições de Victor Coutinho Lage (na Parte I), Manuela Trindade Viana (na Parte II), Roberto Vilchez Yamato (na Parte II) e Michael Marks (na Parte III). Repensando a reconfiguração como um processo geral e constitutivo, Onuf se volta à modernização e ao etos universal da modernidade, ao mesmo tempo em que responde aos seus críticos pós-coloniais e suas (re)leituras de seu modelo altamente generalizado de criação de mundo (*world-making*). Ao fazer isso, Onuf também retorna ao conceito e à conceitualização de metáforas, reposicionando seu trabalho e sua posição como uma forma de ‘antirrealismo incorporado’. Para ele, as ontologias antigas nunca morrem; assim como as metáforas, elas apenas se sobrepõem.

Palavras-chave: Metáfora; figura; conceitos/conceitual; início; modernidade; universal; local

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