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Pilcher Keuneman Katrine

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Jean Paulhan and the tenacity of image

Katrine Pilcher Keuneman

University of Melbourne

Jean Paulhan's intellectual training was as a philosopher. He obtained a degree in philosophy from the Sorbonne and then spent four years in Madagascar where he taught all subjects in the lycée, prospected for gold and learnt the Malagasy language (which he subsequently taught for a short period at the Ecole des Langues Orientales in Paris). War service in the 1914-18 war, and brief imprisonment as a Resistant in the Second World War were the main intrusions of turmoil into a life otherwise entirely devoted to literature, both as editor and as writer.

Although during the Resistance Paulhan founded the politically oriented *Les Lettres françaises*, he is principally remembered as the animating spirit of the journal *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. He was its secretary from 1920 to 1925 and then Director (following the death of Jacques Rivière) from 1925 to 1940, when publication lapsed. He revived the journal in 1953. In this editorial position he knew all the leading writers and intellectuals of the period and his literary judgment was always considered impeccable. The *NRF* was, for example, the first to publish Proust, Giraudoux, Malraux, Jouhandeau. Paulhan's own works consist mostly of essays on literature, language and art (published both in journals and in book form), some autobiographical and literary fragments recently collected and edited by Claire Paulhan and a voluminous correspondence with a number of writers and artists (Guillaume de Tarde, Francis Ponge, André Suarès, Roger Caillois, Giuseppe Ungaretti etc.) which is gradually being published. In 1963 he entered the Académie Française.

Image and figure

I propose in this paper to discuss some of Paulhan's ideas on language — with particular reference to the place of image and figure in language — as they are presented in two works, *Proof by Etymology* and *The Flowers of Tarbes*.

La Preuve par l'étymologie which originally appeared with Editions de Minuit, 1953 was re-published by Le Temps qu'il fait in 1988. *Les Fleurs de Tarbes ou la terreur dans les lettres* was reworked by Paulhan over a number of years before it was published by Gallimard in 1941. It was reprinted in the Gallimard Folio/Idées paperback series as recently as 1990. Interest therefore continues in France in the work of Paulhan, though he is relatively little known outside France. However, interest in writers who are in some ways the inheritors of Paulhan's approach to rhetoric, such as Genette and Barthes, is strong in the English-speaking world; perhaps all that is needed for Paulhan's writing to attract the attention it deserves among English readers is that more of Paulhan's writings be translated into English. *The Flowers of Tarbes* has not been translated into English; however, my own translation of *Proof by Etymology* should be appearing shortly.

Let me give a rapid outline of Paulhan's main thesis in *Proof by Etymology* before highlighting those aspects of the text which particularly concern us here.

Proof by Etymology deals with the illicit uses to which the demonstration of the etymology (or supposed etymology) of words is put. Paulhan shows how both correct and false roots of words are used to justify a belief he believes to be unfounded: that ancient or lost meanings are more valuable and revealing of reality than contemporary meanings. Paulhan questions the way archaic words or primitive languages are honoured more than their latterday descendants or counterparts. He explores the fascination that the notion of a first or original language has long exerted on writers and thinkers. That notion, together with a special respect for hieroglyphics (or similar systems of writing based on characters which appear to have a mimetic function), is often used to undermine what for him is indisputable: that human language systems are primarily symbolic and not directly representational or mimetic.

The games people play with etymology are often closer to pun or free associative word-play than to science. Indeed, despite its pretensions, etymological exploration is more in the nature of a complicated word game or passing fanciful encounter with some pleasing aspect of language than a science.

Etymology can sometimes, it is true, lead us into some interesting byways of linguistic history, but its value in that context is at best anecdotal, says Paulhan. However, etymology doesn't in fact solve the central puzzle of where meaning in language comes from. In the tradition of post-Saussurian linguistics, Paulhan holds that we should not forget that language signifies not inherently but by convention.

We can now look more closely at some of the trenchant criticisms which Paulhan directs towards the believer in the value of etymological enquiry.

The illusions (Paulhan's word) of the etymologist are multiple. One important illusion: that learned etymologising, by taking us back to ancestral forms of language, puts us on a direct path to truth — language directly signifying in itself, short-circuiting the process of meaning by convention. Another similar illusion: that both spoken and written forms of language express their meanings directly and not by means of an artificial code. According to this view, onomatopoeia is not a rare and marginal case for the transmission of meaning in the oral language; it is on the contrary a central phenomenon and, as it were, the model for conveying meaning in the spoken language. Believers in this idea (Mallarmé and Chateaubriand were among them) point to a range of supposedly inherently meaningful sounds.

In a parallel way — and importantly for our subject — it is claimed by some people that the written language expresses meaning directly via various kinds of visual representation. It is important to realise that the thesis being attacked by Paulhan is the notion that the visual impression of letters or characters on the page is not merely the key to a code of meaning which we read instrumentally in order to decode the message. The thesis is that meaning is expressed without mediation by the visual image in the written script — not image evoked by language, but image on the page, in the script itself. In the case of character-based languages such as hieroglyphics or Chinese, the character on the page will be visually suggestive in the manner of a picture. In the extremest version of this view, even the letters of alphabet-based languages are supposed to be expressive depictions of reality. Paulhan attacks the validity of this view even where it might be thought to be convincing, in the case of Oriental characters, by showing that these too are conventionalised conveyors of meaning and not figurative drawings. Even less, says Paulhan, can the letters of the Roman alphabet be considered visual imitations of the meaning they carry.

Other illusions about language which Paulhan attacks are: that foreign languages are full of colourful images which our own native language lacks (naming some of these false beliefs after notable proponents of such views, Paulhan calls this notion: Valéry, or the illusion of the translator); and that some contemporary "primitive" languages are more concrete than our own more abstract "advanced" languages (this myth is associated with Julien Benda).

One of the most persistent and important illusions is the one which places greater value on early forms of language than on contemporary language. The philosopher and teacher Alain, who was responsible for influencing a whole generation of French intellectuals, is given special credit (or discredit) by Paulhan for propagating the idea that primitive language must somehow be more in touch with reality than modern languages. This view is interesting for two related reasons. Firstly, it connects with the underlying sense of the etymologist's search for origins and helps to explain why etymology is thought to be such a valuable field of study. Secondly, the view relates to the notion that we are really looking for an original language which signifies naturally, so to speak. The view can thus be identified as a kind of Cratylism, a variation of the idea that Plato expressed in his dialogue *Cratylus* that the original language must have been, as we would say today, motivated and not arbitrary.

Paulhan's attack on Cratylism is important partly because he closely articulates his argument on the notion of inherent meaning expounded in the Platonic dialogue itself. Gérard Genette has shown us in a helpful article¹ that we can trace back to Plato himself the procedure of arriving back at an original language by way of supposed etymologies and speculations on the symbolism which is attributed to sounds. We can thus see that modern proponents of etymology proceed in exactly the same contestable way as Socrates in the Platonic dialogue. Genette points out that the essence of the Platonic argument can be summed up in a few words: there is a natural appropriateness of names ("*justesse naturelle des noms*"). It is this thesis which Paulhan systematically dismantles in *Proof by Etymology*.

When we turn to *The Flowers of Tarbes*, we find an apparently different problem of language being explored.

Two metaphors run through the work. The first is the image of literature suggested by the sign at the entrance to the public garden at Tarbes: "It is forbidden to enter the garden carrying flowers". Where writing is concerned, critics warn us against the affectations of style and beauty, forbidding us entry to the garden of literature if our thoughts are embellished. The quaintness and perversity of the original sign carry over, Paulhan implies, to the world of literature.

One is not allowed to bring flowers into the garden. Paulhan leaves us to disentangle the strands of the metaphor. Among them we can discern: first, the mistrust by the authorities of the users of what is after all a public garden — the garden of language and literature; second, that due decorum requires self-restraint in a public domain; third, that figures and images are mere decorations superimposed on the austere substratum of signifying language. One could go on... We can infer Paulhan's disappointment at the regrettable mindless arrogance of the petty law makers who seek to control and circumscribe our use of our own language. As against the approach to life and literature implicit in the practice of wardens of the public domain, Paulhan advances both the philosophical idea that bare language and its supposed embellishments are in fact one, and the libertarian political view that we ought to be allowed to be free agents in the over-regulated world of linguistic expression.

The second metaphor is that of literary Terror. Interestingly enough, he conveys a related notion with this rather different metaphor. He quotes the words of the revolutionary delegate Joseph Lebon in August 1793: "The revolutionary tribunal of Arras will first of all pass judgment on accused persons who stand out by virtue of their unusual talents".²

Just as the prosecutors of the people during the reign of the Terror sought to strike down in an exemplary way those of talent or distinction, so Terrorists in literature, moved by a similar zeal for purity, try ruthlessly to eliminate all that appears as useless flourish: cliché, wordiness and over-passionate or loaded language. (I am reminded here of a metaphor in colloquial Australian English. We too like to cut outstanding individuals down to size and when we do so it is described as: *cutting down the tall poppies*. The metaphor seems singularly apt in this context of Paulhan's discussion of Terror, combining as it does the floral image, the jealous attack on exceptional talent and the notion of cutting out, or cutting down the offending person or part.)

We can unwrap Paulhan's Terror metaphor further. Like their forerunners in the revolutionary period we call the Terror, our literary Terrorists could be said to be imbued with the notion of virtue and convinced of their own rectitude and the deviance of others; seeking total and even totalitarian control over thought and expression; and given to radical action to excise corrupting influences wherever they are suspected to be hiding.

¹ Gérard Genette, "L'Eponymie du nom", *Critique*, December 1972, p. 1019-1044.

² "Le tribunal révolutionnaire d'Arras jugera d'abord les prévenus distingués par leurs talents." Jean Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, Paris, Gallimard (Folio) 1990, p. 51

Paulhan's essay seeks to explore to what extent one can in fact purvey "plain meaning" without "style", and he asks whether it is as simple to separate thought and expression as the Terrorists believe. Can we purify language by substituting moderation for excess, and neutrality for colour?

Roland Barthes asked almost the same question several years later in his essay "Writing and silence" in *Writing Degree Zero*,³ Barthes speaks of the search for an innocent form of writing, transparency, white writing ("une écriture innocente", "une parole transparente", "une écriture blanche"). The bland writing of journalism, the deliberately flat style of Camus's *The Outsider*: do these constitute the sought-after plainness and neutrality of style that Paulhan's Terrorist yearns to impose on literature? Barthes concludes that the trail leads nowhere. White writing itself becomes a recognised form of writing, an acknowledged style among others (p. 55- 57). We could add that for Barthes, self-purging is as impossible as the political and institutional purging implied by Paulhan's use of the term Terror.

There are similar interesting parallels between Paulhan's defence of the image and figure in language and the thoughts of Genette several decades later. Genette acknowledges that some styles can be more sober than others. But sobriety itself has a coded meaning in the rhetorical system which is language. As modern linguists acknowledge, all the elements of a system come into play together to give meaning to a particular utterance. An extremely spare style often signifies, quite simply, the sublime. Even the absence of figure is figure.⁴ Genette adds that while a figure may seem to be characterised as deviation from normal usage, it is at the same time itself part of language.⁵

Like Barthes and Genette after him, Paulhan believes that language, and especially literature, must be viewed as always being a coded system. To use sober language is not to write outside the linguistic system, nor even to write in a manner which is linguistically privileged because it purports to be closer to bald reality. In his *Letter to Maurice Nadeau* (published in the same volume as his *Proof by Etymology*) Paulhan calls any work of literature a "language machine" and cites linguistic theory in defence of his view that all words in language are ultimately based on some kind of figure: "metaphor, metonymy, catachresis, allusion or some other figure".⁶

After this detour, let us return to the question of metaphor.

Paulhan's use of two metaphors — flowers and Terror — to make his case against a kind of puritanism in language is, I think, revealing in itself. The Terrorist would like to exclude image and metaphor from language as idle decoration, but Paulhan refuses to be cowed. We can read a kind of rebellion against Terrorist purification of language into the very act of writing metaphor. But Paulhan's denial of Terror goes deeper. If Paulhan sometimes transmits his message through figures of rhetoric it is no doubt because, in certain contexts, the figure expresses thought with greater and not less precision.

Here I propose to offer an analysis in the spirit of *The Flowers of Tarbes*, though going somewhat beyond what Paulhan actually spells out there. A metaphor is not a simile with the "like" omitted. Metaphor consists of images and ideas deeply embedded in language and carrying meaning directly, not mediated by a process of translation into simpler language. Metaphor does not convey thought contingently and in a flowery manner by contrast with a necessary and direct connection which is believed by some to connect "plain speech" and its

³ Roland Barthes, "L'écriture et le silence", *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, Paris, Seuil, Coll. Points, 1953.

⁴ "[L]a Genèse dit: 'La lumière fut'. Rien de plus marqué que cette simplicité: c'est la figure même, et parfaitement obligatoire, du sublime". Gérard Genette, "Figures", *Figures I*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, p. 208.

⁵ "La figure est un écart par rapport à l'usage, lequel écart est pourtant dans l'usage; voilà le paradoxe de la rhétorique."Ibid., p. 209.

⁶ [My translation from the original French.] Jean Paulhan, *La Preuve par l'étymologie*, Cognac, Le temps qu'il fait, 1988, p. 109.

object. Metaphor is constructed in an analogous way to the wider structure of language itself and also shares in the nature of language broadly considered. That is to say that meaning is in metaphor just as it is in language in general. We do not have to translate in and out of metaphor into some plainer language in order for metaphor to function and be understood. Certainly we can tease out meanings contained in the metaphor but we can and do do that with non-metaphoric language as well when we explore the intersections and symbolic limits of words. Thus a writer uses metaphor not to decorate or complicate a simple thought but to express her complex thoughts in a rich, dense and multi-layered form (which may well be simpler and certainly more economical than the translation of the metaphor into other words, a process which by definition substitutes a wordy explanation for a concise one.) Paradoxically, then, if one takes account of all the implications of a metaphor, the metaphoric expression is not, as its critics object, wedded to unnecessary image and affectation, but actually simpler and more economical than alternative ways of expressing all the elements of its complex node.

Certainly there remains the puzzle of just exactly how thought relates to language. But the perplexing relationship between thought and word — which we might express metaphorically by saying that thought seems to inhabit word while yet being free of it — is not a problem specific to metaphor: it relates to language as a whole.

One may experience some tension or apparent contradiction between the two aspects of Paulhan's thought expounded in the two texts *Proof by Etymology* and *The Flowers of Tarbes*. On the one hand, in *Proof by Etymology* we see Paulhan railing against a romantic view of language, according to which language is inherently expressive and not meaningful by virtue of the operation of a formal code. He decries the sentimentality of harking back to a lost paradise of original meanings, which are presumed to be somehow less alienating than our ambiguous and frustrating tussles with meaning and expression in our own language. He seems to be decidedly unpoetic when he mocks the attempt of a Paul Claudel to convince us that the letter "M" "rears up in the middle of our alphabet like a Triumphant Arch supported on its triple base",⁷ and points out, contradicting Claudel, that there is nothing particularly majestic about many of the words which begin with M and supposedly reflect its special qualities. Here we see a Paulhan who appears to be strictly conventionalist and rationalist in his approach to language, denying, for example, the claim that to inscribe visual image on the page is to confer meaning in language, or that to find the image encapsulated in an ancient form of a word is somehow to clinch the argument about what a word means today.

On the other hand, in discussing style in language and its relation to allusion, adornment and flourish in *The Flowers of Tarbes*, he denies the possibility of conveying our thoughts and emotions in a manner which is totally transparent and spare. He seems now to be aligning himself with a sympathy for sentiment — even, perhaps, sentimentality — in language. Paulhan declares that it is indeed an illusion to think that language can be stripped of fixed phrases, clichés, proverbs, entrenched similes and metaphors, allusions and shared cultural references. Wipe them out in a frenzy of purifying zeal, Paulhan seems to be saying to us, and we wipe out language itself. The contradiction between the approaches in the two texts is more apparent than real, however.

Paulhan rejects what we might call a genetic explanation of symbolism in language. Developing a little the argument in *Proof by Etymology*, we could say: Those who believe that the origin of a word offers an explanation of its signifying capacity are confusing history with system. Even assuming that we could ever trace a word back to its first form (for what is there to guarantee that there was not an earlier form in the mists of pre-recorded time?), all we would be doing would be *pointing a finger*, so to speak, at the correspondence between word

⁷ [My translation from the original French] *La Preuve par l'étymologie*, op. cit., p. 19.

and meaning. Locating the ultimate origin of a word — even if it were possible — neither explains nor guarantees the connection between word and meaning. Genette makes a similar point when he claims that the Platonic notion of naturally appropriate names simply pushes the enquiry one step further back.⁸ So a genetic explanation of symbolism still leaves the important questions unanswered.

On the other hand, once we are *within* a language system Paulhan does not reject explanations of the way image and symbolism work in language which might similarly be seen as pointing a finger at language and saying: *that's the way it is*. The primitivists and Cratylists try to place meaning outside convention, but then they have no ladder with which to climb back into the conventional world. If, on the other hand, you consider that we inhabit a world where meaning arises only from shared conventions (looking at language synchronically, therefore, and not diachronically), then we can feel free to exploit all those conventions as part of our linguistic communication. There should be no nostalgia for a more basic code which is somehow assumed to be in direct contact with reality. We can think here of Wittgenstein's phrase in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* : The limits of my language are the limits of my world. It is within a linguistic system that meaning is shaped. We use our language, and think and write it from within. Figures and the complex system of cultural allusion are the natural vehicle of our thoughts: cliché and banality on the one hand, and image and bombast on the other, are the very stuff of language, which we inherit as part of the shared code, and keep alive even as we reproduce or rework them (sometimes through the double reference system of quotation, irony and parody). Language signifies by convention, and not inherently, but the convention is far more subtle and complex than the destructive Terrorist allows. For the Terrorist or the seeker of lost paradises, language has a natural origin but must be pruned down to a purified and controlled set of basic forms in daily use. The Terrorist no doubt imagines there is a univocal relationship between a word and a thought. For Paulhan, by contrast, language, while purely conventional in its theoretical foundations, is naturally complex, coloured and multi-faceted as a working system. Paulhan believes there is a polyvocal relationship of style to thought: multiple ideas and associations intertwine in language.

There is a convergence, then, in the two texts *Proof by Etymology* and *The Flowers of Tarbes* in the way they value ordinary language and its capacity to draw on image and figure. The attitude of superiority affected by false learning (in the case of *Proof by Etymology*) or Terror (in *The Flowers of Tarbes* or the *Letter to Maurice Nadeau*) is quite unjustified in Paulhan's view. Perhaps oddly, we see this most cultivated of men, who writes in a style which is arcane rather than immediately accessible to the common reader, taking up the cause of the genius of ordinary language and the rights of the common person. Thus, in *Proof by Etymology*, the pseudo-science of etymology, based on false premises, is dethroned, and the creativity of popular language, puns, word plays and even deformations of language based on mistaken understandings of the primary sense is celebrated. Etymology is interesting not as etymology (for its claim to ultimate knowledge of historical fact and ultimate "explanation" of meaning is untenable), but as a kind of imaginative and expressive reworking of language. Similarly, in *The Flowers of Tarbes*, our right to our own forms of expression is asserted. Once again, Paulhan is attacking what he sees as comfortable delusions in many people's approach to language. We are, in fact, often blind to cliché and unconscious quotation, (more often in our own than in other people's use of language). Paulhan believes we should tune in to our own language to become more aware of its sources and functioning, not at all with a view to tossing out what can be identified as borrowed or bequeathed, but with the aim of harnessing

⁸ "[E]n quoi consiste cette justesse? En la fidélité du nom réel, incarné en sons et en syllabes, au nom idéal, ou nom 'naturel'. Mais ceci, bien sûr, ne fait que repousser la question d'un cran: en quoi consiste donc la justesse du nom naturel?" Genette, *L'Eponymie du nom*, op.cit., p.1026.

the past to our own creative purposes. On the other hand, we should become more tolerant of the style of others. Stylistic criticism is often merely blinkered and self-serving: the Terrorist tends to perceive — and condemn — stylistic banality or extravagant use of image or figure only where he perceives it, in someone else's style. It is thus only too easy to condemn such qualities as faults or affectations.

Towards the end of *The Flowers of Tarbes* Paulhan writes:

At the entrance to the garden in Tarbes could be seen a new sign: 'It is forbidden to enter the public garden unless you bring flowers with you'. All things considered, it was quite an ingenious rule, for the people strolling in the gardens already felt they didn't quite know what to do with the flowers they had in their hands and had no thought at all of picking more.⁹

So Paulhan invites us to wander in the garden of language at will, bringing with us the posies thrown us by previous users of the garden. Borrowing an image used by Barthes in *Criticism and Truth*, we might add that we should also feel free to weave from the flowers our own wreath of language.¹⁰

We can, therefore, delight in the expressive qualities of the images and metaphors that seem to us best adapted to our thought, and throw off the shackles of censorship and self-censorship imposed by pedants and purists. We cannot discard image in language and neither should we wish to.

⁹ [My translation from the original French] "On vit, à l'entrée du jardin de Tarbes, ce nouvel écriteau: 'Il est défendu d'entrer dans le jardin public sans fleurs à la main'. C'était une mesure ingénieuse à tout prendre, car les promeneurs déjà fort embarrassés de leurs fleurs, étaient loin de songer à en cueillir d'autres." Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, op. cit., p. 166).

¹⁰ cf. the words of Barthes, speaking of the critic's task: "tresser autour de l'oeuvre sa couronne de langage". Roland Barthes, *Critique et vérité*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, p. 56.