



## Magic to Metaphor: From Empire to Philosophy, the Travesty of the Woven Textile

A mystique remains around the acts of weaving, a continuing aura that has survived the slave workshops of early Mediterranean cultures and the miseries, at least for the hand-weaving trade, of the industrial revolution. It is thought that the skill, the driving force behind an ancient industry of cultural and economic importance was historically mainly female in Western cultures (Barber 1994:12). The power, threat and dramatic appeal of a technology designated 'women's business' is seen in Euripides' story of Medea who was brought to Corinth as the wife of Jason. Her foreignness, her intelligence, and her store of medicinal and herbal knowledges earned her fear and jealousy. Using poetic license, Euripides elaborates upon a dyer's knowledge to introduce sorcery and sudden death. Medea constructs a garment imbued with the poisonous 'dragon's blood' dye, a gift for the princess of Corinth who was to supplant her as wife. The princess Kreusa dies quickly and horribly whilst Medea escapes in a chariot drawn by dragons.

Unravelling Euripides' plot, Elizabeth Barber reveals that the soft mineral realgar, yielding a purplish red dye — a colour favoured by royalty — is sulfide of arsenic, also called 'arsenic ruby' and sometimes 'dragons blood' (1994: 234). Prolonged skin contact will certainly kill the wearer, if not with the speed with which Euripides killed off the young princess. This plot device, in its linkage of dye, poison and sorcery, reveals the magical aura surrounding craft knowledge, especially perhaps the dangerously exclusive textile lore of women.

Aside from meeting a basic need of warmth and comfort, through the ages cloth has been imbued with such multiple and mysterious meanings. Barber summarizes three ways in which it becomes itself an encoder of messages: there is the carrying of information (American quilts made by slaves had escape routes in their designs), the recording of events (the *Iliad* of Homer tells how Helen weaves a narrative incorporating battle incidents from the long siege of Troy), and the invocation of "magic" — to protect, to secure fertility and riches, to divine the future... to curse" (149).

Until the industrial revolution, women spent "every available moment, spinning, weaving and sewing" (Barber 1991: xxi). Other cultures,

other continents provide notable exceptions to this tradition of seeing fabric production as a female activity, but English folk songs direct a sense of betrayal at young women weavers who chose the steam-power workshops over cottage industry:

My father to me scornful said,  
 'How could you fancy a factory maid,  
 When you could have girls fine and gay,  
 Dressed like unto the Queen of May?'  
 ...

Where are the girls? I will tell you plain;  
 They have all gone to weave by steam.  
 If you would find them, you must rise at dawn  
 And trudge to the mill in the early morn.

("The Weaver and the Factory Maid", Steeleye Span)

Their defection from what had never been romantic scenes of rustic craft was, however, a logical one. Although the numbers of handlooms in the cottages of the nation registered in the hundreds of thousands (a report to the British Parliament indicates how in 1837 in one city alone — Glasgow — there were 18,420 looms weaving cotton gingham and like fabric), hunger and deprivation were bound up with the trade. To deal with the caprice of the market and to compete with the new steam-power in the factories, the piece rate on hand-loom work was continually reduced:

The steam engine ... is both better and greater ... it must supersede the hand-loom weaver, unless the latter can furnish his work at a cheaper rate.

The situation was worse in Ireland for the linen weavers:

The cabins that the weavers live and work in are fearful specimens of what habit will enable a human being to endure; it is impossible that any good description of work could be woven in such sinks of filth.

(*Hand-loom Weavers: Report to the Commissioners*, House of Commons, 25)

Notwithstanding the plight of these nineteenth-century weavers, a romantic image of weaving persists. Some of the work of George Eliot explores the problems facing factory workers and owners, but not her story of Silas Marner, set in the era of the Parliamentary Reports on the industry. As far as this weaver was concerned, he lived and wove his days in seeming tranquility. A cyclical pattern of wearing away and replacing bed and table linen in the households of his area encloses Marner as he collects the spun yarn and delivers back to them the woven goods. He lives poorly but he has meat for his supper, unlike most of the distressed weavers of the time.

From all accounts, it was not changes of local or overseas fashion, nor was it factory weaving powered by coal or water and employing mainly women and children at minimal rates of pay (thus reducing the number of hands to maximise the piece-rate income for cottage work) that rendered the weavers' efforts almost fruitless. In the eighteenth century the American colonies were forbidden to weave wool for the trade, and after Independence the states began to compete seriously with British exports. The Napoleonic wars also had a deleterious effect upon trade with Europe; closing of ports during war with France and also America inhibited export, and then the ending of war with both countries brought increasing competition with America and the continent of Europe. In the Parliamentary Report, the weavers remark bitterly on the import duty on silk, making the woven product uncompetitive with imports often smuggled into Britain. Manufacturers complain of a poaching by Germany and Belgium of ideas and skills in machinery development despite a legislative embargo on the export of ideas or machines. Cottagers had to pay a high price for bread due to the restrictive corn laws; they paid a window tax and a poor law tax on their dwellings, whilst in their extremity they were forced to resort to the same meagre poor law relief. The very work of weavers, bending over the loom for long periods, rendered them unfit for manual labour when bad times came. In good markets, too many people took to the loom, women preferring to weave than to go into domestic service. Both of the sexes preferred the relative autonomy of working under their own roof, answerable to no master or mistress, organising their own working hours, albeit within the grindingly demanding production process:

they were working a 70-hour week ... their food is normally of a coarse description, and often deficient in quantity. The furniture in most of their dwellings is scanty and miserable; their beds are often of straw, and seldom among the poorer class are they provided with clothing by day or covering at night so good as the common day-labourers.

*(Hand-loom Weavers: Report, 1838: 6)*

If the general economy made no distinctions between individuals, the Reports to Parliament about the distress of the weavers calibrate work output according to age and sex. Perhaps the 1837-38 report is the last time that hand-weaving has had so much attention lavished on it. The ratio of required skills to the musculature available is considered; simple weaves required little skill and children could be put to these looms, whilst in times of high demand unskilled men would set up as weavers and as the Report

says "would be paid children's rates". Coarse weaves required the strength of strong and young men whilst the requirements of the draw-looms and fancy weaves, work of sophisticated skills which often took three weeks to set up the loom were the prerogative of a smaller and more select group of weavers.

The Commissioners commented unfavourably on the family life of the cottagers. Housekeeping had no priority for wives working at the loom, and the destabilizing effect of periods of unemployment induced lethargy and despair. The morals of the weaving community were also inspected; sexual attraction between young factory workers together for twelve to thirteen hours each day led, it was thought, to too early marriage and childbearing.

Once machines completely dominated the public imagining of textile production, however, the notion of weaving somehow became bloodless, disembodied, removed from memories of hunger and distress. Weaving was turned into a metaphorical conceit in the theorising of literary narrative, stripped of reference to its actual conditions of production. Accompanying this shift, industrialised spinning and weaving was represented as a male activity, with female 'hands' tending the machines, and women's textile work moved back into polite and romanticised (and again, potentially secret and mysterious) domestic 'craft'. The symbolic re-feminising of fabric arts is also accompanied by an actual movement of women into 'sweatshop' and piece-work production for the globalising garment industry and a glossy trade in charity catalogues of Third World 'folk-art' weaving. How do we find connection between the ongoing histories of toil and suppression and the language of 'post-industrial' societies able to talk figuratively of 'the rich tapestry of life', or 'suturing' disjunctive elements into a 'seamless' narrative?

The use of imagery in language has not escaped philosophic notice. Philosophy reminds us that reason and logical structure have not been able to deal comprehensively with human experience. In this context we might ask what it is that a weaving metaphor supplies to this gap in philosophy; is it a longed-for tactility to redeem mental abstraction; does the distinction reproduce the (misleading) set of binaries: male/female = mind/body? Michèle Le Doeuff, for example, in *Hipparchia's Choice*, writes of the 'virile' metaphor in the philosophical tradition, and the tendency towards masculinist properties and dominance of language (78).

**Michele Le Doeuff: Metaphor.**

In *The Philosophical Imaginary* Michèle Le Doeuff asks how what is missing may be introduced into the coherence of a secular and scientific discourse. Within philosophy, the interpretation of imagery remains elusive, its use is somewhat stealthy, and Le Doeuff suggests that where imagery is (generally) regarded as an embellishment, and superfluous to the real work of theorization, it is considered to be non-philosophical and appealing to the child in us, in the same way as nursery stories, old wives tales and folklore (6). She claims, however, that the figurative image is not an illustration, but a mark of tension where some meaning struggles for expression, and this locus of need impels philosophy to draw on imagery immersed in other disciplines such as religion, literature or sociology. For example, she shows how, in "Daydream in Utopia", Kant has recourse to the motif of the island and Descartes' use of house and tree images originates in the Gospels (94).

Le Doeuff suggests it is "the interpenetration of the theoretical, and the practical... where imagery suffers 'internal displacements', a process that is constituted by the limited capacities of the system" (96–97). Le Doeuff's proposal is that philosophical textual imagery should be recognised as closely related to other disciplines as a valuable and essential resource and as a teaching device, instead of being passed over and generally negated as not being part of the conceptual framework. The imagery derived from a variety of discourses which forms a recognisable pool of supply Le Doeuff calls the 'philosophical imaginary', which, in her view, should be accorded equal status with abstract thought in a kind of semiological democracy. This reassessment of knowledge systems offers a theoretical analogue to corrective questioning of representations of 'craft' fabric skills as non-intellectual and female.

Le Doeuff's work may be seen as a precursor of recent philosophical explorations where there is a rethinking of the status of the body in relation to its others: culture, history and society (Grosz 1994, Butler 1993). In this context, her project can be aligned with studies of the categorising of peoples and geographies in colonial discourse, where the East is a feminine, slippery, sly, soft counterpart to the West characterised by 'hard' philosophies of will and action (Rabasa, Sandison, Said). Her critique, however, can be charged with leaving figurative language as a necessary *adjunct* of philosophy. Jacques Derrida undertakes a more thorough-going rejection of such a hierarchical binary.

### Derrida: Metaphor

Metaphor has included the notion of a 'using-up' or a diminishing, a loss from the original term, the cost of the subsequent enriching of a concept. Derrida questions this possibility of diminishment and enrichment in "White Mythology" where he presents an extract from a dialogue subtitled "the language of metaphysics" (in part a discourse on *Gardens of Epicurus* by Anatole France) in which the character Polyphilos argues that metaphysicians are constrained to live perpetually in allegory: "They produce White Mythology' (the translation has been modified: "Their output is... an anaemic mythology")" (213). Polyphylos brings in the coin analogy:

Metaphysicians ... are like ... knife-grinders, who instead of knives and scissors, should put medals and coins to the grindstone to efface the exergue (the reverse side) ... they are (then) of an inestimable value, and their exchange value is extended indefinitely. (194–95)

Polyphylos is claiming a loss for the sensory image and an 'effacement' of its value, however Derrida reminds us that etymologism cannot be validated by a sort of historical excavation in the hope of gleaning some purity from a 'natural', or 'primitive' language (as Polyphilos assumes). Derrida refutes any notion of a 'using up'. As his translator comments, he is "dead set" (1978: 15) against metaphor being dominated by a concept of wear and tear.

If we adopt this idea in relation to the weaving metaphor, we can think of its use not just as a loss of meaning requiring a redemptive salvage of historical origins. The weaver's art in the present or the past is not a 'natural language' to be travestied or erased by figurative language, but nor is figurative language the simple carrier in itself of past experience. Understood in Derridean thinking, metaphor is part of a "nonlinear signifying chain of meanings constituted in intertextual processes" (Nye 260, note 41) and there is no latent meaning embedded or lying under the added layers of changing circumstance as Polyphilos believes ("White Mythology" 213). Metaphor, in its present usage, nonetheless is a form of thought entailing remembrance of cultural practices, even as the conceptual abstraction from simile to metaphor renders the traces of those practices fainter. Derrida's practice extends Le Doeuff's notion of using the imagery from other disciplines — images of the bodily, the psychic, the social and historical — to meet the demands of philosophy.

Within deconstructive thinking, language operates in distance and deferment, and is always engaged with differing. The 'lag' in signification becomes analogous with the 'gap' in metaphoric imaging. Metaphor becomes central rather than secondary as a vehicle for meaning-making. Meaning is a kind of passenger on the transport of language/metaphor; *Metaphorikus* in modern Greek is a means of transportation, or rather we who use language and are constituted by it are constantly displaced by the transit of metaphor (we follow its 'drift' to use a nautical figuration). To stop (metaphor) would be 'to run aground' (Derrida 1978: 7).

Derrida gives a timely reminder that metaphor is something in which we circulate, which we inhabit and without which *nothing happens*, and paradoxically metaphor gets along without any input from us, passing through us as it were, and existing in spite of and because of that which cannot exist without it — language. Metaphor returns as an 'intrusive repetition', and it withdraws (*retrait*) whilst always leaving its mark in the text as a "supplementary trait" (8), which Derrida calls a "double trait" (*re-trait*).<sup>1</sup> Homi Bhabha, citing Hannah Arendt, employs the idea of the 'lag' and of 'uncanny' iteration to characterise postcolonial texts' uncovering of gaps and depoliticising of 'forgettings' in hegemonic narratives, whether colonialist or patriarchal (Bhabha 10-12).

#### Weaving the Text

In *Dissemination*, it is as if Derrida decided to re-iterate something of the ancient and material value of the textile; his play on the word 'tissue' (cloth and bodily substance) holds metaphor against a more direct textual use of the textile, weaving and the body. Here the textile metaphor looks to be what Polyphilus calls 'a considered use', more as a "transparent figure equivalent to a literal meaning" ("White Mythology" 211). In the use of the textile figure there is, nonetheless, a displacement, and as Polyphilos says, a displacement that becomes double when philosophical discourse puts it into circulation. A good example of simple displacement is in Walter Benjamin's commentary on Proust's *Memoire Involontaire*; he uses the familiar figure of Penelope in the context of weaving and unweaving, saying, "And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warf [sic] a counterpart to

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida's term "supplementary" is part of his deconstructive strategy which includes creating an undecidable term within a binary logic (Grosz 1989, xv).

Penelope's work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night has woven" (Benjamin 204). This is an analogy that does not depersonalise Penelope, and is more a simile than a metaphor. But the text then continues in a turgid way: "When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting". This is an example of a double displacement; women's work becomes an image for forgettable qualities of life which are the material for abstract processing by a 'virile' philosophising.

*Dissemination* contains many textile references, and in the introduction to her translation Barbara Johnson remarks that there is a recurring emphasis on weaving, and seeding in this text, where Derrida is considering the agenda of presentation and representation in the history of Western philosophy and literature. Not ironically I think, she refers to the text as combing the history of reading and writing for the "threads with which to weave its signifying warp" (Derrida 1981, xxiv). The first paragraph in the first chapter of *Dissemination* ("Pharmacia", which examines the *Phaedrus*), situates that work and the textile in its historical relation: "the graphic relations between the living and the dead: within the textual, the textile, and the histological". (Here the idea of the *pharmakon* as both cure and poison returns us to Medea's deadly dye.) Derrida brings the textile into the text with erudition, and his awareness of the long relationship of text and textile is shown with a play on both metaphor and the reference to weaving:

We will keep within the limits of this tissue: between the metaphor of the *histos* and the question of the *histos* of metaphor. ("Pharmacia" 65)

The punning reference to weaving and flesh (with sound links to 'history') parades metaphoric usage. It may be explained by the old Greek for the upright beam(s) of the ancient frame loom, and to Derrida's explanatory footnote "*Histos: anything set upright... beam of a loom*" (65 note 2). The *histos* of metaphor is another clever and double way that Derrida allies textile into language. Metaphor takes on the doubleness of the woven grid, the horizontal 'carry across' of the bar and the vertical 'digging in' of the posts: a substitution of one word for another in a kind of vertical temporality, a digging down into what LeDoeuff hints at in her discussion of Descartes' use of metaphor as a place outside of philosophy. She asks, "what other's language speaks in the image?" (1989: 96). In the related images of skin and clothing, loom and language, we have the idea of the limit/boundary, the relational differential interface between inner and outer at which meaning is made.



Ferdinand de Saussure writes that a word will unconsciously call to mind many other words which are related in *some way* but *not by a horizontal linearity*. The substituted word is selected for its similarity of meaning or imagery to the displaced term without a natural analogy between them. 'Texere', 'text' and 'textile' are situated syntagmatically, that is, in a horizontal, grammatical or linear fashion, but if we follow *histos* as the setting up of the beam of the loom, or *histere-mi*, 'to make stand', we can move along paradigmatically to *hustere-a*, and *hustere-ai*, 'derivation uncertain', to 'hysteria' (Liddell and Scott). The loom and the womb may have the same homonymous root and Derrida would not be unaware of this connection, although he writes about a certain "out of placeness" of language, how it is affected by unconscious motivations, and by a "historical overload". Derrida warns against a presumed etymological root being held up against the process of transformation, explaining that he chooses the example of *hystera* to introduce what is *supposed* to be behind that other interface, the hymen: that "which exposes itself only by transference and simulacrum, by mimicry" (*Dissemination*: 181–82, note 8). Thus, avoiding essentialising formulations, woman and body are again linked to weaving and connected with the abstract language of 'male' philosophy.

I have adumbrated a series of events spanning in no comprehensive way two and a half thousand years of but one aspect of Western culture — the woven textile and its journey from function and/or symbolic value into metaphor and out again. The vignettes here of the woven textile move from a mythological source of fascination through a praxis of oppression to a disembodied textual application. Derrida's playful language reconfigures this resilient, basically cheerful skill which in its *hand-woven* mode is strongly associated with the bodily actions of the weaver, and reveals something of its history of the craft as female skills.

I have been helped in this question by Sadie Plant who crosses many boundaries in her work *Zeros and Ones*. She reminds us of the mathematical genius of Ada Lovelace who in 1833 worked in conjunction with Charles Babbage, the inventor of the 'Difference Engine' (following on from others such as Wilhelm Leibniz's Stepped Reckoner and Blaise Pascal's arithmetic device). It was Ada Lovelace and the work she did on the concept of the Analytical Engine (which followed the Difference Engine) who conceived the prototype of the computer software we now use. This lay unused for a hundred years until the appropriate hardware had been developed. Lovelace began by translating an Italian engineer Menabrea's *Sketch of the Analytical Engine invented by Charles Babbage Esq*, and it was in her

notes to this (which were three times longer than Menaebra's work) that her comprehension of the seemingly infinite possibilities of the system began to surface. It was not the stupendous calculating efficiency of the engine which excited her but the *mutuality* between seemingly independent occurrences which influenced each other under the most diverse and complicated conditions. She writes "All, and everything is naturally related and interconnected, a volume I could write on this subject" (Plant 11).

The ancient and very contemporary philosophical notion of interconnectedness engages me and so does Plant's re-insistence and explication of the close relation that Ada Lovelace highlighted, between digitalization via the chip that currently structures our lives, and the material gathering of threads of the woven. The 'immersive zone' under discussion harks back to the Jacquard automated punch-card loom of the early nineteenth century. This in turn was a development from the ancient Iranian and Chinese draw looms. The invention of Joseph Marie Jacquard removed the necessity of human intervention in the patterning process of a weaving system which had required elaborate calculation and manipulation sometimes over a period of weeks, and "it transferred this control to the hardware of the machine" (Manuel de Landa quoted in Plant 14–15). (There's a postcolonial connection for Australian readers in that this prompted the so-called Luddite riots and the transportation here of some of our ancestors in 1834.) In her *Notes* Ada Lovelace said, "Certain stuffs (materials) require for their fabrication not less than *twenty thousand cards* ... the Engine could far exceed even this quantity" (Plant 19). With the introduction of the new 'backing' system she invented, automated weaving became the link between the elaborately figured Iranian silks of some 5000 years ago and the micro-chip. Plant writes:

the gathering of threads ... twist and turn through the history of computing, technology, the sciences and arts. In and out of the punched holes of automated looms, up and down through the ages of spinning and weaving, back and forth through the fabrication of fabrics, shuttles and looms, cotton and silk, canvas and paper, brushes and pens, typewriters, carriages, telephone wires, synthetic fibres, electrical filaments, silicon strands, fiber-optic cables, pixelated screens, telecom lines, the World Wide Web, the Net, and matrices to come (12).

I am interested in how Ada Lovelace's observation of the interconnectedness of everything, reinforced by Plant's interest in the multiple implications embedded there and Derrida's metaphoric philosophy, re-enfranchise, liberate even, the textile from its backward-

leaning associations as an outmoded, antiquated skill no longer required by our technological culture. Considering the concurrence of the chip, the text and the textile, weaving may be reinvested with some of the subtleties and the intensities of human making, an involvement which requires not only a re-awareness of sensory input, but a new appreciation of the patternings of brain and hand over twenty millennia.

John Locke may seem a strange figure to invoke in such a context, but his observation that metaphor is the transference of "bodily senses to abstruse signification" (Nye, 260 note 41), and Hannah Arendt's conviction about the necessity of remembering bodily experience, can be combined to support a claim for the retention of a politicised, historically informed use of metaphor. Le Doeuff and Derrida show us how such work can actually enrich and reform language and learning. The crafty rehistoricising of philosophy via a play of textile and female metaphors can be applied to related patterns of colonialist thought and technology, and used to examine the contemporary place of the weaver — often a woman and mostly in the Third World doing piecework for the webs of global cyberspace.

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