

METAPHOR AND LITERARY MEANING

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It is a curious paradox that although theories of metaphor have been abundant in this century, they can hardly be said to have transferred into the practical work of literary critics interested in elucidating the meaning of literary texts that include metaphors. If this is so, then either critics are failing sufficiently to inform themselves of relevant advances in theory or the theories themselves are of little help—at any rate when one is looking at actual literature. In studying the meanings to which literary language gives rise critics have long been accustomed to the need to make explicit levels of thought which are only implied by the words on the page, but in the case of the metaphor—one of the most potent linguistic devices for the creation of thought beyond the language—there is still no generally accepted *literary* theory. In this article, therefore, I want to look first at some representative modern theories of metaphor and offer some suggestions as to why none seems adequate for the study of literary meaning. I then go on to outline a theory which, I think for the first time, makes possible the full integration of the metaphor into its literary context instead of considering it as an isolated linguistic phenomenon. I hope that it may for this reason enhance understanding both of metaphor and of literary meaning in general.

Some writers on metaphor have been so impressed by its power that they have claimed the metaphorical process as the fundamental power of language. By contrast they oppose to it a plain or literal usage, so that a given example of language is either metaphorical or it is not. Philip Wheelwright, for instance, will call any example of 'depth language' metaphorical whether it is formally a simile, a metaphor or indeed a simple juxtaposition. For him what distinguishes a metaphorical usage in his extended sense is the idea of metamorphosis.

What really matters in a metaphor is the psychic depth at which the things of the world, whether actual or fancied, are transmuted by the cool heat of the imagination. The transmutative process that is involved may be described as *semantic motion* . . . the double imaginative act of outreaching and combining that essentially marks the metaphoric process.¹

All presentations of 'diverse particulars in a newly designed arrangement' are to be considered metaphors, and this includes such presentations as Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro':

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

—which Wheelwright quotes as an example. If the multiple meanings of language are reduced to eliminate such outreaching and combining, we have what Wheelwright calls block or steno-language, in which each word has one fixed meaning in its context. This leads Wheelwright to identify the metaphorical process with all that is imaginative and transcending in human thought, to make 'metaphor' stand for almost the same thing as Coleridge's 'esemplastic power'—the poetic process itself. Behind this hagiography of metaphor lies a useful theory of language and thought, but if it is to have any future value for criticism, we need a more precise and less impressionistic presentation, one that will define the place of the metaphor more clearly in the spectrum of language's different functions. In his effort to capture the spirit of metaphor Wheelwright casts his net so wide as to haul in anything that functions vaguely like a metaphor. But a more practical understanding of the structure of metaphor must be grounded in an understanding of the nature of language itself.

The distinction made by Wheelwright between block and metaphorical language is not a new one. It seems to me to be rooted in the distinction that can be made about language itself, between *denotation* and *connotation*. This is the difference broadly speaking between a word's literal or dictionary meaning and its many associated meanings, between its usual single referent and the fringe of multiple other referents that surround it. Denotation is the meaning of a word in block language, its use as a 'mere label'. Thus the word *cleaver* denotes the chopper used by a butcher. Connotations are the parts and qualities that make up a concept—the wooden handle and metal blade of the cleaver, its sharpness and weight—the associations surrounding it—the butcher's shop in which it is usually found, the meat and bone it is used on, the blood that will be found on it, its likeness to other knives, etc.—and the feelings that may attach to it—we may think of butchery, of murder, or of our appetite for lamb chops. Connotations are the complex of associations and feelings that surround a word; they constitute the total of our experience of the situations in which we find the referent or concept which the word denotes. It is clear that each individual will have his own range of connotations for each word according to his experience of the referent, but most words have a core of connotations which remain relatively stable over time and among most members of the same community, what Max Black calls a 'system of associated commonplaces'.² Thus *cleaver* has for most people in our own time, I suspect, an indissoluble connection with murder through a series of films and detective novels in which it figured outside its more usual role. It is this system of cognitive and affective connotations surrounding each word that permits the non-literal use of language.

When language is used figuratively the basic process that takes place is the transfer of connotations. In this respect the metaphor demonstrates a type of process common to all figurative language, but it is only one of a number of

ways in which language can be used to transfer connotations—there are also juxtaposition, simile, symbol, synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole and euphemism. All these tend to confer on the subject word or phrase one or more extra meanings beyond its usual denotative or connotative meaning. Thus if we take the subject common-sense, this has a fairly stable group of connotations, a 'system of associated commonplaces', by which we understand it to be something generally useful, constructive and harmless. But if I say in a metaphor that a particular Baudelaire poem was subjected to *the cleaver of common-sense*, the connotations of murder, butchery, cutting through the bone, are transferred from *cleaver* to the effect common-sense had on the poem. In this instance the result of the transfer is startling, involving *common-sense* in an almost complete reversal of its usual meaning. What happened to the poem was clearly far from useful, constructive or harmless.

Such a figurative use of *cleaver* seems to imbue its context with a kind of energy, a process that has clearly impressed many twentieth-century writers on language. As the process has become better understood metaphor has in this century become reintegrated into normative theories of language. Statements such as this of Empson are typical—'metaphor, more or less far-fetched, more or less complicated, more or less taken for granted (so as to be unconscious), is the normal mode of development of a language'.³ This new respect for the metaphor has on the one hand led to extravagant claims on its behalf by writers such as Wheelwright, and on the other hand to a number of new theories of metaphor by linguists, philosophers and critics. But it is a singular fact that none of the new theories is of more than marginal interest to the literary critic. Some are nevertheless worth looking at briefly since the reason why this should be so is of some interest, and it can tell us something of importance about the place of metaphor in the meaning of literature.

Theories of metaphor can be rated according to the degree of creation which is thought to take place in the metaphor. The ornament theory which prevailed up to the present century holds that the metaphor embodies a literal meaning, a meaning that is quite capable of being stated plainly but that it is deliberately obfuscated in order to give the reader the pleasure of working out the literal meaning intended, or to give the reader a shock of 'agreeable surprise'. All that is created according to this view is a *frisson* of pleasure. Close to this is the comparison theory, that metaphor is no more than a condensed simile. As Max Black observes,⁴ this has been a longstanding and popular view, and it is still current. Here the metaphor is held to assert that some property or properties of the subject and of its modifier resemble each other. In fact such a theory is next to useless.

In terms of the transfer of connotations the ornament theory does nothing at all—nothing is gained because the subject could have been described

literally in any case. The comparison theory seems to depend on a pre-existing identity of certain connotations, that the subject and its modifier possess certain connotations in common to which the metaphor draws our attention; again, no actual transfer of connotations seems to be implied. One can see that the theory has some truth in the case of weak metaphors such as *cherry lips*, where the connotations of redness, roundness, firmness, etc. are offered by both parties to the metaphor, but it overlooks other aspects of even this metaphor which depend on the transfer of connotations from the modifier *cherry* to *lips*, such as sweetness; and over such metaphors as *the cleaver of common-sense* where there are no connotations held in common, it has no explanatory power at all.

Despite his strictures on the comparison theory Max Black's own 'filter' theory⁶ appears only to be a more sophisticated version of it. In the metaphor *man is a wolf*, the word *wolf* possesses a 'system of associated common-places'—that is to say, ideas of something fierce, carnivorous, treacherous and so on. In this metaphor, according to Black, the word *wolf* filters out all those traits of man which cannot be seen in terms of fierceness, carnivorousness, etc. No transfer of connotations is implied. But the weakness of Black's theory is of course that we do *not* filter out the more normal connotations of man when we hear the metaphor; half of the force of the metaphor (such as it is) comes from the contrast we are made aware of between man's normal qualities and his wolf-like qualities. To see man as wholly and exclusively wolf-like is to lose much of what the metaphor has to tell us about this type of deviance of man's nature from what we would consider to be its norm—that aspect of man which is *not* fierce, carnivorous or treacherous. What such a metaphor sets up is not a filter but a *perspective*.

W. B. Stanford's description conveys this aspect of metaphor effectively. Metaphor, he says,

is the stereoscope of ideas. By presenting two different points of view on one idea, that is by approaching a word through two different meanings, it gives the illusion and conviction of solidity and reality.⁶

With Stanford we begin to approach the idea that metaphor actually creates something, instead of simply highlighting it or filtering it. I. A. Richards's more acute understanding of language enables him to offer a view of metaphor that is grounded in the nature and mode of action of language in general, one in which new meaning is genuinely created. According to Richards's 'context theorem of meaning', meaning is

the delegated efficacy of signs by which they bring together into new unities the abstracts, or aspects, which are the missing parts of their various contexts . . . a word is normally a substitute for (or means) not one discrete past impression but a combination of general aspects. Now that is itself a summary account of the principle of metaphor. In the simplest formulation, when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different

things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a result of their interaction . . .⁷

Metaphor, he goes on, is not simply 'a verbal matter, a shifting and displacement of words . . . fundamentally it is a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts'.⁸ Useful though this is in its focus on context and thought, nothing he says about the metaphor would not be equally true about many other aspects of language. His coining of the terms *tenor*, to describe the subject of the metaphor, and *vehicle*, to refer to its modifier, which have since become the standard terms in much discussion about the metaphor, do not isolate anything unique to the metaphor; they are descriptive rather than definitive. Richards tends to use them indiscriminately to refer sometimes to the denotation of a word in a metaphor, sometimes to its connotations, so that no precise view of what takes place in a metaphor emerges.

But Richards does offer something like a perspective view of metaphor. The interactions of tenor and vehicle are not confined to their resemblances: Richards also points to the effect of disparity. In fact a metaphor without some degree of disparity is not conceivable—it is the disparity that alerts us to the presence of metaphor (although this, again, is not unique to the metaphor). As Richards says, talk of the fusion that a metaphor effects can be misleading.⁹ In *the cleaver of common-sense* we do not see common-sense behaving as though it were an actual cleaver; its operations acquire the character of brutality and murder while still being seen as the operations of common-sense. It would be more accurate to say that certain of the connotations of cleaver temporarily fuse with our notion of common-sense—others, such as its wooden handle or its connection with lamb-chops, get left behind. We are simultaneously aware of fusion in certain, but not all, respects, and of disparity; hence the sense of perspective in a good metaphor.

In Wheelwright's account of metaphor the affect of tension which arises from the disparity is given a central place—he seems to be the only authority on the metaphor apart from Gustaf Stern¹⁰ (who does not develop the idea) both to discover this quality and identify its source:

The essence of metaphor consists in a semantic tension which subsists among the heterogeneous elements brought together in some striking image or expression. Poetic language implicitly cross-weaves multiplicity-in-unity and unity-in-multiplicity; it is tensive because of the precarious balance between two or more lines of association which it invites the imagination to contemplate.¹¹

But Wheelwright inflates metaphor, as I mentioned (and as can be seen even in this passage), to include all poetic language, and renders himself incapable of saying anything about the metaphor except in very general terms.

In seeking an account of the structure of the metaphor some of its characteristic traits can be found described in each of the different theories I have surveyed—affective qualities, tension, disparity, perspective—but none gives

anything approaching a full or satisfactory analysis, and none offers more than a very limited insight into what specific qualities a metaphor is likely to contribute to the *meaning* of a literary work. There are perhaps two major reasons for such striking ineffectualness, both inherent in the fact that none of the authors appears to have studied in detail what metaphors in literature actually do, how they interact with their contexts. Firstly there is the fact that metaphors in literature only fairly rarely occur singly—they are much more often found in combinations of two or more. This rather remarkable point is not commented on by any of the authors except Wheelwright, whose *diaphor* (a trope consisting of ‘a group of several dissimilars and a relating them on the basis of a felt congruity’)¹² refers rather loosely to this phenomenon; and it limits the usefulness of even such a thorough and otherwise invaluable study as that of Christine Brooke-Rose,¹³ in which the majority of metaphors studied are single. Statistics are of strictly limited value, but the incidence of single versus multiple metaphors in poetry is sometimes quite surprising. In Donne’s sequence of nineteen sonnets, the *Divine Meditations*, there are 137 metaphorical usages of words or phrases; of these only eleven are unconnected in some significant way to a further metaphor or metaphors within the same poem, and several of these are connected to a simile or some other image. From the semantic point of view, therefore, discussion of an isolated metaphor when it actually shares areas of meaning with adjacent metaphors or other aspects of its context, is almost useless. Secondly and more generally, such theories of the structure of metaphor as ‘transaction between contexts’, ‘stereoscope’, ‘tension’, and the like, tell us almost nothing about what such an enriched context *means*, or, to be precise, what kinds of new meaning the metaphor brings into being. An unacknowledged difficulty with the semantic status of the metaphor seems to lie here behind the confusion and proliferation of theories on metaphor. Although the syntactic structure of the metaphor can be defined quite precisely, there appears to be no single or unified range of meanings which the metaphor alone is capable of embodying: almost everything that I have quoted writers on the metaphor as saying could in some instances be applied to other kinds of linguistic device. There are many similes in poetry which are as powerful as the best metaphors; and many metaphors that have weakened and faded into literal usage. Thus the great variety of metaphors in literature seems, at any rate in the present state of our knowledge, to rule out any definitive semantic theory of metaphor that would entirely exclude figures such as simile and symbol. Some sense of this seems to lie behind the hyperbolic use of the term ‘metaphor’ by writers such as Wheelwright, but this is to cloud understanding of the nature of meaning in literature where we should be seeking greater precision.

My own four-part theory of metaphor, which I want to present now in the last section of this article does not pretend to be definitive; nor, as will

become evident, would one want to claim that all four aspects of the metaphor are present in each instance of the use of metaphor. But the advantages of the theory are, firstly, that it provides a basis for connecting the meaning of a metaphor to its context—even, if appropriate, to the meaning of the whole work in which it is found; and secondly, that it permits a precise analysis of some of the ways in which meaning and thought are created beyond language. Some of the terms I use to characterize the several processes of the metaphor are not new, but it is the first time, I think, that they have been brought together in this way to help explain the function of the metaphor. The four aspects I have in mind are (i) transfer of connotations, which I have already discussed in some detail, (ii) defamiliarization, (iii) tension, and (iv) generalization.

A metaphor, it will be remembered, may highlight the connotations which its subject and modifier have in common as was largely the case in *cherry lips*; but the more interesting and striking metaphor will transfer certain of the connotations of the modifier to the subject, giving to the subject temporarily connotations or meanings lying quite outside its own range of connotations, both cognitive and affective. To the extent to which new connotations are transferred on to it, the subject will be defamiliarized. Thus in the case of *cherry lips* certain connotations are transferred, and these give even this well-worn metaphor a degree of force. With a faded metaphor such as the *leg of a table* or *eye of a needle* no one now is aware of any connotations being transferred and the subject therefore undergoes no defamiliarization. With the *cleaver of common-sense* not only does the metaphor depend entirely upon the transfer of connotations, but the connotations of *cleaver* are markedly opposed to those of *common-sense*, so that the defamiliarization of the subject is here at its strongest.

The concept of defamiliarization is not new to criticism. It is perhaps best known from the writings of the Russian Formalists, where it was originally developed by Shklovsky. Shklovsky defined art itself as defamiliarization, a way of making familiar objects strange and renewing perception. But notions of defamiliarization can be found also in Coleridge, in his account of what Wordsworth was to contribute to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth's object, he says, was 'to give the charm of novelty to things of everyday', to direct the mind to the wonders of the world, 'which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand'.¹⁴ Such benefits can be claimed as part of the more specific virtues of the metaphor, but the most useful aspect of applying the idea of defamiliarization to the metaphor is that it allows us to analyse with some precision aspects of both the language and thought of a metaphor and its context.

In the first place it alerts us to the fact that the subject of the metaphor must either in itself have a strong and clearly understood system of connotations,

or have had them conferred upon it by its context, in order for defamiliarization to be possible. The *cleaver of justice* as a metaphor has only a vague and dubious import, probably of something bad, because the connotations of its subject *justice* are so hazy and indefinite; but one can readily see how the metaphor would gain greatly in force if *justice* had already been established by its context as something either markedly good or markedly corrupt. It also reminds us of instances of metaphor which are entirely dependent upon context. As Ina Loewenberg remarks,

in some cases the circumstances of the utterance of a sentence determine whether or not it is metaphorical. . . . 'Smith is a plumber' could be true or false literally, or it could be a metaphor—if Smith is a surgeon.¹⁵

To account for the meaning of a metaphor, then, we must not only describe what kinds of connotations are transferred from the modifier on to the subject, but also what the connotations of the subject itself are *before* defamiliarization—whether they are inherent, whether they have been induced by the previous context or to what extent the context has reinforced them.

Defamiliarization thus directs us to these several semantic aspects of a metaphor and its context; it also, as Coleridge and others have noted, carries an emotive charge. This is the principal contribution that defamiliarization makes to the thought created by a metaphor. It is the effect of metaphor noted by the ornament theorists, who refer to the pleasure of problem solving or to the shock of agreeable surprise it induces. But a study of the kinds of connotations transferred to the subject by the modifier will enable us to determine more precisely what the characteristic affect of defamiliarization is likely to be in a given case. For instance, the generally good affect attaching to common-sense is subverted and overthrown in my metaphor. Or in this metaphor of Yeats, from 'The Tower', to 'plunge . . . Into the labyrinth of another's being', the strictly neutral effect of the noun *being* is overlaid with foreboding and thoughts of strenuous striving. Such affects may often be perpetuated or mutated by the context which follows the actual metaphor.

A third aspect of metaphor, arising from defamiliarization, is *tension*; but where defamiliarization directed us to look back at the metaphor's possible dependence on its preceding context, this directs us to the consequences of the metaphor in what may follow. This tension is the dissonance between the subject's normal meaning and the alien connotations transferred on to it by the modifier. There is an awareness of both these meanings simultaneously—the phenomenon I referred to earlier as 'perspective'—and their disparity may set up an expectation for either resolution or elucidation. This will be particularly noticeable in cases where a poem is introduced by a metaphor, such as the striking first line of one of Donne's sonnets: 'Batter my heart, three-personed God . . .' It is the aspect of metaphor that seems to have caused the most misunderstanding, many writers referring to the metaphor

as a fusion or unity, as though it somehow closed up in itself, and exhausted all the potential of, the disparity between subject and modifier. But as I hope I have already made evident, no metaphor would ever be perceived as such if we were unable to perceive its contrast of meanings.

This tensive aspect of metaphor is probably the most fruitful in generating meaning beyond the language. Even the well-worn metaphor *cherry lips*, considered singly and in isolation, suggests several ideas lying beyond the connotations of the contributory words, which are both vivid and precise. For instance kissing would, I take it, be one of the normal connotations of the word *lips*, but *cherry lips* suggests the firmness of flesh of the lips beneath the kiss, their roundedness and rich colour; and it also conveys the notion that the lips are ripe—their owner neither too young nor too old, and of course probably female. This one simple metaphor, then, conveys a strong impression of a particular pair of lips and also something about the person to whom they belong. The tensive quality of the metaphor leads us to expect that one or more of its implications in this way will be taken up or developed.

The fourth and last aspect of the metaphor I want to mention is its generalizing function. The effects arising from this function of the metaphor, however, seem to me more problematical and less amenable to analysis. Whereas the aspects of defamiliarization and tension directed us mainly to the subject of the metaphor, this directs us to the nature of the modifier, and is an effect largely confined to cases where the modifier is a noun. In its context the *subject* of *lips* is being referred to, or one particular occasion on which *common-sense* was used, rather than lips or common-sense in general. And this is indeed one of the virtues of the metaphor, in that it enables us to specify, to particularize, to make us see an individual object or envisage some individual occasion. But the *modifier* imports connotations from an alien sphere, from an object or idea which has not been so specified. We are not referring to a particular cherry or a named cleaver, but to the qualities of cherries and cleavers in general. This general aspect of the modifier in the right circumstances has the perceptible effect of universalizing the context of the metaphor at the same time as the transfer of connotations from the modifier particularizes the subject. If this seems paradoxical, it nevertheless gives rise to one of the most striking features of literature, and one whose origins are often poorly understood. It is true that universality is not exclusively or even mainly created by metaphor, but an understanding of the way it works in metaphor will cast some light on other forms of the generalizing process.

In general the metaphor relates the particular subject to the larger world via a non-specific modifier, but in practice the degree of generalization felt will depend on the status of the modifier in the world. Cherries and cleavers have only a limited and fairly local significance as items in the world's furniture, so their respective metaphors have hardly any generalizing force.

But with a noun such as *winter* or *sea* employed as modifier, a metaphor may be felt to have considerable power to universalize its context. I have in mind such metaphors as these of Shakespeare: 'Now is the winter of our discontent' or 'to take arms against a sea of troubles'. Or consider the rising and setting of the sun in this passage of Wordsworth:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting . . .

Or the apparently more mundane business of eating, as it figures in Paster-nak's 'Parting':

Now she has gone away;
Unwillingly perhaps.
The parting will eat them up,
Misery will gnaw them, bones and all.

The difficulty of analysing where exactly the force of the modifier lies is I think inherent in the fact that we are not clear what the power of the winter, the sea, or the sunrise, might be in its own right. Each of these images has a profound role in shaping the world as we know it, and we cannot tell how deep the reverberations of each may go into our minds; each has a kind of archetypal significance such that only a few of its implications can be felt consciously at any one time—we have no way of knowing how the rest may unconsciously be affecting and colouring our response to the metaphor in which they occur. What we can say is that the use of such a word as a modifier unites the small world of a metaphor's subject to the rhythms and cycles of the large world, or some substantial aspect of it.

Wimsatt and Brooks note the fusion of universal and particular of which the metaphor is capable, adding that it 'would seem to be the only verbal structure which will accomplish this feat'.¹⁶ This seems untrue to me: there are a number of ways in which verbal structures in addition to the metaphor can simultaneously create both universal and particular meanings, and by virtue of its own facility in this respect a metaphor may often be linked to its context through such shared areas of meaning. A full theory of the metaphor in literature would in fact go on to demonstrate how metaphors may expand through the devices of extended, parallel and multiple metaphors, and how the tension and generalization of the metaphor can unite it with the structure of meaning in a whole work. But in the present article I have tried to show some of the preliminary features on which a critically useful theory of the metaphor might be founded.

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