METAPHOR

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

We can begin to consider the study of metaphor by considering the nature of text, and of the word 'text' itself. If we were to be asked for a definition of 'text', our first recourse might be to a dictionary, and here we would find what at first glance appears to be precisely the definition we need:

> The wording of anything written or printed; the structure formed by the words in their order; the very words, phrases, and sentences as written.
>
> (*Oxford English Dictionary* [*OED*])

This may seem as though it is a clear, 'literal' meaning, and certainly it absolutely summarises some of the everyday uses of the word that we might make when contemplating the study of literature – although even here we may suspect that the dictionary meanings do not quite cover the expansion of the word 'text' into phrases like, for example, 'text-messaging'.

However, when we delve further into the dictionary definition, even this apparently solid ground starts to appear distinctly more unstable. Indeed, the further history of the word is supplied at the very head of the dictionary entry: it comes from the Latin verb 'texere', which means to weave. Thus, we might say, 'text' is something which is woven; but what

exactly do we mean by this? Do we mean to refer to the original structure of paper, or papyrus, as something which was woven; or do we mean to refer to writing itself as something woven? Can we fully distinguish between the two? We may say that we have two images here, one of the paper, one of the words on the paper; but in the word 'text' these two images are brought together, and it would be difficult to say which of them has primacy.

Here, then, we are within a process of metaphor; a process, to use the most common definition of all, by means of which one thing is made to stand in for another thing. When we speak of 'twenty head of cattle' (which is a specific use of metaphor), we do not mean – and know that our hearers, or readers, will not expect us to mean – that twenty cows' heads are careering across the countryside, or indeed standing peaceably in a field; here the word 'head' does not have the customary meaning we might expect but rather stands in for another thing, for the cattle themselves. Specifically, this is an example of *metonymy*, the reduction of (in this case) the animal to a single representative element. And words, of course, especially common words like 'head', can have a multitude of meanings, often dependent on how and where they are used: the head of a school or other organisation, by which we mean the person in charge; the head of a river; the head by which we signify one side of a coin; the head of a weapon (such as we might find Geoffrey Chaucer alluding to in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* (1387) when he speaks of a spear being 'of fyn ciprees . . . The heed ful sharpe y-grounde' [Chaucer 1912: 504]); the head of a stringed musical instrument; the head of a bed; the head as the 'rounded leafy top of a tree or shrub', as the *OED* reminds us, giving an example of Edmund Spenser describing 'most dainty trees; that . . . seeme to bow their bloosming heads full lowe' (Spenser 2001: 702) – and so the list could go on. All these, we may say, are metaphorical usages, in that they adapt the root term 'head' as descriptive of a specific part of the body (human or otherwise) to other spheres of life; but as we look more closely, we may suspect that in fact the operations of metaphor go further than this. For all these usages rely, in one way or another, on the notion that the head is not merely the physically highest part of the human body; it is also, we have come to assume, the 'superior' part of the body in a less literal sense. It is true that this slippage can be justified by saying that we would not survive very long, or indeed at all, without a head; but

neither would we last very long without a liver, or with no kidneys, yet we do not accord these organs the same status as the head.

What I mean to imply from this example, and to continue to explore in the following chapters, is that the processes of metaphor are everywhere at work in language. 'At work': and in using that term too I am venturing, inevitably, into the realm of the metaphorical. Of course, these processes are not sitting there, with a hammer and anvil, working away; when we say 'at work' we mean to suggest that something is happening, and that we need a suitable image in which to convey what it is that is happening. If all language is metaphorical, or at least invested with a certain metaphorical potential, then it could also follow that we might want to say that all language is continually involved in a series of acts of translation: translating things which are difficult to apprehend into things which we can apprehend, or conceptualise, or visualise, more easily. After all, all uses of language, from the very simplest to the most complex, are acts of communication, or at least they set out to be acts of communication whether they succeed or whether they fail, and therefore there is some implied motivation behind them, at some level, which seeks to engage the reader or listener. Metaphor seems to be integral to this need for engagement: even if we could conceive of a language without metaphor, which would be difficult to the point of impossibility, it would be a deeply drab and extremely restricted language. It could be, and has been, argued that such an imaginary language would approach the condition of mathematics, but even this seems doubtful; certainly the Roman numeral system is in a sense metaphorical, or at least 'figurative', in that the number of marks on the paper makes some attempt to represent figuratively the notions of one-ness, two-ness and so on.

One of the most frequent usages of metaphor is as *simile*. It has sometimes been supposed that simile is a different figure of speech from metaphor; but in fact it is a sub-species of metaphor, which is distinct only in that it keeps the notion of comparison explicit. In Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938), the anti-hero Pinkie experiences a moment when he almost repents of his many past villainies:

> He felt constriction and saw – hopelessly out of reach – a limitless freedom: no fear, no hatred, no envy. It was as if he were dead and were remembering the effect of a good confession, the words of absolution:

but being dead it was a memory only – he couldn't experience contrition – the ribs of his body were like steel bands which held him down to eternal unrepentance.

(Greene 1970: 179)

The simile here is expressed in 'like steel bands' (simile is always worded in terms of 'as' or 'like'): here Greene is comparing the spiritual constriction which afflicts Pinkie to a more physical, more conventionally material image, which both effects a specific connection with the reader and also expresses Pinkie's own need to translate his experience into something concrete.

Simile may be in one sense cruder than other forms of metaphor, in that it does not seek to conceal its artificiality; but alternatively one might say that it is the original form of metaphor. When camels are spoken of as 'ships of the desert', the missing word 'like' is, as it were, present but 'under erasure'; it has been omitted but the notion of 'likeness' continues.

As a different example of metaphor we might think about the word 'fascist'. Nowadays that word seems to have a field of precise connotations, largely held in political movements ('movements' is clearly another metaphor!) of the mid-twentieth century; but the word itself derives from another Latin term, the *fasces*, which were:

A bundle of rods bound up with an axe in the middle and its blade projecting. These rods were carried by lectors before the superior magistrates at Rome as an emblem of their power.

(OED)

We could fairly conjecture that when the fascist movement appropriated this image, this was done with an awareness of its metaphorical power; that what was being said, or indicated, was, for example, something about power and authority, and about the threat of violence at the heart of apparent order.

We do not necessarily think about, or even know of, these things now when we use the word 'fascist'; it would therefore be possible to suggest, as some critics and linguists have, that what we have here is a 'dead metaphor', in the sense of one where the original meanings and implications have been so eroded that they have become irrelevant to our

processes of communication. But the question of when, or whether, a metaphor can ever be truly dead is a vexed one. Consider, for example, the first stanza of an apparently simple poem written by Philip Larkin, called 'How to Sleep' (1950):

> Child in the womb,
> Or saint on a tomb –
> Which way shall I lie
> To fall asleep?
> The keen moon stares
> From the back of the sky,
> The clouds are all home
> Like driven sheep.
>
> (Larkin 1988: 35)

Nobody, I think, would claim that the metaphors of a child in the womb and of a tomb effigy to represent sleep are new; indeed, they are so old that we barely perceive them as metaphorical at all. Indeed, when in a different poem, 'An Arundel Tomb' (1956), Larkin speaks of two such effigies on a tomb and says, 'They would not think to lie so long' (Larkin 1988: 110), the comparison between the stillness of the effigies and sleep is so quiet as to be barely perceptible. Similarly, the metaphor by means of which clouds become sheep is in no way new; on the contrary, it can be found in visual terms in hundreds of children's books.

Yet, it would be possible to contend that these apparently 'dead' metaphors are in fact revivified by their location in this stanza. Perhaps this is done by juxtaposition, because the image of the 'keen moon' staring 'from the back of the sky' is by no means moribund; the moon in Western tradition has a host of attributes (inconstant, deathly, pallid, but also, and sometimes contradictorily, regular, amorous, female) but 'keen' is not among them. This metaphor derives its force from the sense that the moon is not 'literally' 'keen' in either the sense of 'sharp and cutting' or 'enthusiastic or eager'. Indeed, the metaphor moves through the stanza, exercising a menacing force that might make us look again at the implicit violence of the image of the 'driven sheep'. In fact, by one of those complex tricks that language is constantly playing, the way 'keen' and 'moon' might really interact is by inviting us to see a picture of the moon 'keening' (a quite

different word, meaning 'weeping' or 'mourning') over the scene, which in turn will colour in a mood and will induce us to doubt the apparent tranquillity of the child or the saint. This kind of phenomenon is very close to the force of the *homonym*, a term which refers to words which sound alike but have quite different meanings.

Let us briefly consider another metaphor. It occurs originally in a novel by Ian Fleming, *Dr No* (1958), but it has become the staple of the long series of James Bond films. We may note in passing that 'bond' is also a metaphor for the stability of the financial 'bond', and especially through a standard phrase, 'his word is his bond', it signifies honourableness or reliability. However, the particular phrases to which I want to call attention are: 'A medium Vodka dry Martini – with a slice of lemon peel. Shaken and not stirred' (Fleming 1958: 208). Almost every word of this quotation has metaphoric resonance. The word 'medium' signifies Bond's poise, his ability to remain centred while there is chaos around him. 'Dry' signifies a certain kind of 'dry wit', a wry amusement before the scenes of carnage which continually threaten to envelop him. The making of the martini with vodka – rather than, as more usually, with gin – signifies Bond's individuality, and simultaneously his calm and powerful ability to make the world accede to his wishes. The unusual precision of 'a slice of lemon peel' signifies his exactitude, his unwillingness to tolerate the second rate or second best.

As for 'shaken and not stirred', a whole litany of metaphorical equivalents could be read from this phrase. The contents are principally sexual and emotional: Bond as a character is perfectly willing to engage in sex (to be 'shaken'), but none of this will imply that he is 'stirred' (in its common metaphorical sense of being, or becoming, emotionally involved). In a broader sense, it implies Bond's willingness to become involved in the events around him without having the essence of his character changed. What is shaken returns eventually to its previous state; what is stirred might lose its pristine shape and become some kind of composite or compromise, but Bond's monosyllabic naming metaphorically signifies his essential separation from the world around him. And this spreads out to involve the reader, or the viewer of the films: we are expected to be 'shaken' by events, because otherwise we would not continue to follow the narrative in search of resolution; but in the end we are not expected to be stirred by them, because if we were we would be losing some of Bond's

supposedly admirable *sang-froid* (a French term which could be translated as 'cold blood'). And so, from this brief comment, we find ourselves having metaphorical recourse to a whole myth of Englishness: calm amid surrounding pressures; resistant to the allurements of the foreign; capable of equipoise even under the most difficult of circumstances. Indeed, we might say that what Bond precisely does is to take elements of the foreign, such as vodka and martini, and 'translate' them into the props of an English myth.

In 1978, a conference on metaphor was held at the University of Chicago. One of the papers was by Wayne C. Booth, and it began as follows:

> There were no conferences on metaphor, ever, in any culture, until our own century was already middle-aged. As late as 1927, John Middleton Murry, complaining about the superficiality of most discussions of metaphor, could say, 'There are not many of them' . . . Explicit discussions of something called metaphor have multiplied astronomically in the past fifty years. This increase is not simply parallel to the vast increase in scholarly and critical writing. Shakespeareans have multiplied too, as have scholars of Homer, of Dickens, and of Charles the Second. But students of metaphor have positively pullulated . . . We shall soon no doubt have more metaphoricians than metaphysicians . . . I have in fact extrapolated with my pocket calculator to the year 2039; at that point there will be more students of metaphor than people.
>
> (Booth in Sacks 1979: 47)

Wayne Booth jests; nevertheless, and somewhat frighteningly, as I write we are almost up to the halfway point between 1978 and 2039, and the study of, and interest in, metaphor shows no signs of abating.

However, it is true that the study of metaphor has changed enormously over the last thirty years, and in ways which it would have been difficult to predict in 1978. The advent of new kinds of literary theory, the specific contributions of thinkers like Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida to the study of the text, the attention paid in new historicist and cultural materialist criticism to the formative power of tropes and rhetorics, all of these have in different ways contributed to revolutionising our thinking about metaphor. This book aims, then, to chart a path for the reader

through these recent developments. Beginning by saying something about the classical background (Chapter 1), it then seeks to relativise this tradition by comparing it with Eastern versions of metaphor (Chapter 2), and to emphasise an essential continuity between ideas on metaphor and the public realms of language and politics (Chapter 3). Ways in which these public uses of metaphor influence the literary are examined in the chapter on the 'text instead' (Chapter 4). The insights of psychoanalysis are seen as essential to understanding the functioning of the metaphoric (Chapter 5), and metaphor is seen as being the very ground on which a text constantly goes beyond itself in an uncanny fashion, saying both more and less than it knows (Chapter 6). What remains important about metaphor, however, is to see it at all points as responsive to the wider cultural sphere, and especially as a site on which similarities and differences can be constructed and tested (Chapter 7); one of the crucial areas in which we can see metaphor functioning in literary and public ways, which the book will take as a specific example, is on the terrain of the postcolonial (Chapter 8). Although each of these chapters produces and looks at examples of metaphor from diverse fields, it is important to work through some examples in detail (Chapter 9), before moving to a conclusion which attempts to summarise for the reader recent developments and the current situation in the theory of metaphor (Chapter 10).

But before we 'embark' on this narrative, let us consider a final example of a metaphor which, while apparently simple, carries a remarkable freight of meanings and that also points to the crucial importance of metaphor in our daily lives. This concerns a firm of London builders from Indian backgrounds, who some years ago painted on the side of their van the slogan: 'You've tried the cowboys; now try the Indians'. In a way, metaphors of this kind, which are also jokes, or at the very least involved in a complex field of irony, are difficult to talk about, partly because talking about them threatens to unbalance the delicate poise that sustains the metaphor, especially as a kind of 'speech act'. However, we can at least do something to describe the metaphorical field at play here. We could begin with the usual meaning of the clichéd phrase 'cowboys and Indians' to describe a certain American cultural genre, chiefly represented in the movies but also present in the fictions of Zane Grey and others. And we could say that this is a metaphor in itself: it has come to stand in for a whole period of American history, with the concomitant idea that the

white men who are signified by the 'cowboys' represent the 'side of good' against the primitive world of the North American Indian. This, however, is cross-cut with another myth, which is of the 'outlaw': the perpetuation of the myth, which is still very much with us today, if only in the 'survivalist' conditions of the extreme American rural right or in the Texan rhetoric of George W. Bush, clearly supports the metaphor of the cowboy as somebody who lives outside the law and yet has his own codes and practices of honour. As Bob Dylan encapsulated the myth, 'to live outside the law, you must be honest' (Dylan 1994: 349).

This is a metaphor which has now come to support a notion of US individualism. We are a long way from a 1787 usage of the term, 'A Flaxen headed cow boy, as simple as may be' (Bickerstaffe *et al.* 1792: II, 36), where the term is used in support of a non-violent pastoral myth. Instead, we have here the cultural transition to the common trope of the 'cowboy builder', which carries various metaphorical connotations: lawless, certainly, but in a distinctly unpleasant sense, as somebody who rides in by day and rides out again by night, leaving the job unfinished, the stairs waiting to fall down as soon as they are trodden on.

But our builders have picked up on another stream of metaphorical meanings, concerning, first, the stereotypical treatment of the 'Indians' in Western films; this stereotype is based on a cardinal misnomer, however, since the reason American Indians are called 'Indians' at all is a reflection of the colossal mistakes of Western explorers concerning what they thought they had found, and where they thought they were, when they lighted on the shores of America. Here there is a more or less forcible rejoining of this meaning of 'Indian' to the older idea of somebody who comes from the subcontinent of India. There is thus a certain deliberate 'inappropriateness' to this metaphor; it is not designed to suggest or produce an exact 'fit' between two different ideas or images; rather, it is supposed to challenge the reader to look at the fissures, the cracks in our cultural conception of the 'Indian'.

And this, I suggest, we shall find whenever we look closely at metaphor; although metaphor undoubtedly deals in likeness, similarity, it also deals in unlikeness and dissimilarity. Metaphor makes us look at the world afresh, but it often does so by challenging our notions of the similarity that exists between things; how alike they are; and in what ways, in fact, they are irreconcilably unalike. Thus, metaphor represents a basic

operation of language: it seeks to 'fix' our understanding, but at the same time it reveals how any such fixity, any such desire for stability and certainty, is constructed on shifting sands.

'Shifting sands', to conclude, is obviously a metaphor; here, I hope, it is one that is being used accurately in order to provide an image of dangerous uncertainty, and indeed the threat of engulfment. If we think of another 'sand' metaphor, 'to draw a line in the sand', it is remarkable how this metaphor has come, certainly in recent years, and perhaps especially in the hands of politicians, to reverse its own signification. 'To draw a line in the sand' is clearly an impossible, or at best a somewhat temporary, task; but when politicians seek to convince a sceptical public that they are about to seal off some dreadful past event or strategic failure, this seems to be the metaphor towards which they reach, unaware (we hope) that the metaphor is itself constantly undermining their claims to be in control of circumstances.

1

THE CLASSICAL PROBLEM
FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Let us now turn to the history of metaphor. Since at least the time of Aristotle, it would appear that Western literary, linguistic and critical traditions have been interested in the possibility of differentiating between literal and figurative language. Within that general process, attention has focused on establishing a system both on which to base this differentiation and within which to distinguish further between different types of the figurative. Within these extensive and complex traditions, it is possible to establish a continuing dialogue between different valuations of the figurative, and consequently between, on the one hand, views of metaphor as adornment or elaboration, and, on the other, metaphor as the basic structure of language, according to which representations offer 'versions' of referents and thus inevitably imply an 'originary' process of metaphorisation.

There is no better place to begin than with Aristotle, who is generally regarded as the first thinker to elaborate a theory of metaphor. In his *Poetics* (350 BC), Aristotle first characterises it as a sign of absolute linguistic mastery and, therefore, of a certain type of genius. As he says, 'It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others, and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in

dissimilars' (Aristotle 1909: 71). Far more important, though, is that Aristotle located the specific use of metaphor in poetry rather than in either of the other great divisions of discourse: rhetoric and logic. By doing so, he makes it clear that he does not regard metaphor as integral to language's functioning; rather, it is a kind of decoration or ornament. It has the power to please, which is an exciting and perhaps, under some circumstances, a dangerous power; but it is in some sense an addition to the 'normal', by which we might infer 'literal', workings of language. Aristotle further defines metaphor as 'giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy' (Aristotle 1909: 63). Behind this there lies the notion that every 'thing' in nature has its own 'proper name'; metaphor constitutes a kind of infringement of this rule, whereby 'names' are conveyed from one thing to another. This may be done, as we have seen earlier, in the literal comparisons of simile; or there may be a certain 'hidden-ness' which is more typical of other processes of metaphor. At all events, the underlying intent, according to Aristotle, is to point out resemblances; these resemblances may move the reader or hearer beyond the 'usual' linguistic and rhetorical rules of clarity and decorum, but they are justified because the reader is, as it were, 'brought up short'; he or she is in the presence of something unusual, something outside language's normal ambit, and this can serve to deepen the reader's experience, to bring a suddenly enriched apprehension of the world.

The actress Vivien Leigh once said of the dramatist and political thinker George Bernard Shaw: 'Shaw is like a train. One just speaks the words and sits in one's place. But Shakespeare is like bathing in the sea – one swims where one wants' (quoted in Nicolson 1968: 297). Now this is what we might well recognise as the simplest form of metaphor – simile, where the comparison, the 'transference' (*metapherein*) between the two entities, is explicitly signalled by the word 'like' (or sometimes 'as'). Some would say that this is the basic form of all metaphor; what causes metaphors which are not cast in the linguistic form of the simile to have greater power is precisely the omission of the 'like', an omission which brings the two compared entities far closer to each other in a way that challenges the reader or hearer to make sense of the assumed or alleged comparison rather than having it spelt out. The point here, however, is that the reader is expected