Metaphor

In science, metaphor is used to explain, test or visualize one (novel) reality in terms of another (less novel) one. A well-known example is the Bohr-Rutherford model of the atom in terms of the solar system: electrons orbit the nucleus as planets orbit the sun. The metaphor superimposes one reality upon another, and then asks a lot of questions to find out how well the superimposition actually works. If enough answers are negative, then a new model, a new metaphor, will be needed.

Metaphor in literature is very different. It describes one reality – a woman, say, or a landscape – in terms of something different. Underlying the difference must be a species of similarity, however exotic, or the metaphor does not work at all. The comparison must defamiliarize a known perception to some degree, or it will appear merely trite. The metaphor becomes exhausted in literature, unlike science, not when it yields too many inaccuracies, but when it has become so predictable that all the original defamiliarization has vanished. Then the metaphor has become a cliché and something new is needed to replace it. A cliché is a metaphor that has become undetectable; its distinctive perception has degenerated into triteness. For our purposes here, a simile is simply a loosely-bound metaphor, and no serious distinction will be made between them.

Inherent in both figures of speech, the metaphor and the simile, is a process of pattern recognition notable for its novelty. We notice a similitude, separated by difference, and we then fashion both elements into a single image in which our subject and its comparison are combined. A famous example might be Donne’s pair of compasses.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

The pattern recognition here is radical. The comparison appears initially grotesque: the souls of two lovers are compared to a pair of compasses. But then Donne, with characteristic brio and panache, makes the image work. The compasses are endowed with some of the characteristics of the lovers. The phrase 'hearkens after it' is effectively using personification to imbue the compasses with feeling. This operates in the same way as the pathetic fallacy: with the latter, one attributes emotion and intention to nature, while here sentience and longing are attributed to a scientific artefact.

In Section Four of Mandelstam's late poem 'Verses on the Unknown Soldier', the poet talks of a ray of light with slanted feet balancing on his retina. The image is evidently that of a *saltimbanque*, a juggler and acrobat of the sort often painted by Picasso early in the twentieth century. They would balance on balls; Mandelstam has brought this image together with the idea of a beam of light made up of photons balancing on the ball of his eye. The image is as daring and provocative as Donne's. Its power arises out of its unexpectedness. Metaphor is crucial to poetry, as the linguist Roman Jakobson has argued in various essays,[1] but the metaphor needs to be highly inventive, and not merely mechanical.

We are looking here at pattern recognition used to fuse apparent dissimilarities into images of unity. The dissonance which is perceived, the apparent difference between the two elements brought together in the metaphor, is finally overcome by an ultimate sense of harmony and concordance, but the dissonance is essential to provide the image's energy. In other words, a metaphor, when inventive enough, creates a readerly *frisson* by employing as much dissonance as possible, while still redeeming the image into its ultimate coherence by pointing to a structural similarity that underlies the surface discord of the two components. When all that tension between the two parts of the metaphor or simile is lost, then the metaphor is dead: it has shrivelled into a cliché, because the dissonance has departed, and the remaining consonance has become no more than a frequently repeated comparison. There is no tension remaining to provide either the resistance or the recognition.

The momentary resistance, generated by our first encounter with a striking (i.e. successful) metaphor, is an acknowledgment that a new space, however tiny, must be created for it in the mind. A metaphor is a kind of oscillator, moving back and forth between two categories, two situations, two creatures, two planetary systems. Its pendulum effect generates a projective imagery which perceives or creates a similarity, or a shared identity, where none was previously noticed. The verbal oscillator institutes a dialogue between differences, which emerges in a figure of speech, announcing some species of similarity, however remote that similarity might seem.

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[1] See in particular Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987).

In my novel *The School of Night* I wrote this sentence: 'Fluked in a dawn light, London reinvents itself.' There are two metaphors working here. A fluke is a happy outcome achieved by chance. A snooker player aims for a red ball he wishes to pocket; he misses that ball, but the cue-ball comes off the cushion, finds another red, and pockets that instead. The player has been lucky. Happenstance has done his work for him. This is a fluke. In what sense, then, can London ever be fluked by light? If one is being 'strictly logical', then it cannot. Metaphor is here, as so often, ascribing intention where there is none. And then the second metaphor comes into play (to use a metaphor about the functioning of metaphor itself) and we have London reinventing itself. This personifies London, providing it with intention and intelligence. What is the purpose of the two images in this one line? The attempt to achieve vivid language. Metaphor defamiliarizes by generating energy in the language and a corresponding brightness in the imagery.

Such a seeming conflict between metaphor and 'strict logic' is what made Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society* denounce 'this vicious abundance of phrase'; by which, as we have noted, he meant figurative language, particularly metaphor. He was writing in the seventeenth century, not long after the Royal Society had been founded. The assumption behind his denunciation was that language could be voided of its figurativeness. It cannot. Language is inherently figurative and inherently metaphorical. There is a not a 'poet's language' which can be dispensed with, to be replaced instead by a 'scientist's language'. What the intelligent writer does is to exploit this inherent figurativeness of language, this metaphoric shape-changing energy inherent in language itself, and produce rich imagery out of it. Good metaphors, whatever else they are, are always expressive of intelligence and acute perception.

Attempts have been made to separate out the two elements making up a metaphor. I. A. Richards spoke of 'tenor' and 'vehicle'. It is hard to see how these distinctions help us much. More to the point, perhaps, is the fact that the more potent and unusual the metaphor, the more it will depend on delimiting the characteristics held in common between the two original elements. The word 'elements' here is metaphoric itself, so let us pursue the inherent metaphor. Two different atoms come together to form one metaphoric molecule. This can only happen, in language as in nature, if there is a shared logic between the atoms in the first place; some compatibility, however remote it might seem (think of Donne's lovers and the compasses). We are searching for a previously undiscovered isomorphic relation.

We saw how Marianne Moore spoke of a swan that 'turns and reconnoitres like a battleship'. Technically this is of course a simile, but for our purposes the metaphoric effect is worthy of remark. What are the two atoms that have come together here, to form our metaphoric molecule? The movement of a swan in water and the movement of a battleship through the ocean. These are the two atoms. Now the truth is that a swan is not really much like a battleship. It is much smaller, for a start; it is organic and covered in feathers; it does not contain sailors and there are no guns on its back. There is just one shared feature that the poet has settled on: a stately motion through the water, a long and graceful curve through the waves. And even here the imagery is operating at its limit, because battleships are not, in fact, much use for turning and reconnoitring: they are far too big. Much smaller boats are far nimbler for the purpose. If you are using a battleship to reconnoitre, then you have probably already lost your sea battle.

Rather than speak of 'tenor' and 'vehicle' with Richards, let us think of 'projective and interactive imagery'. Metaphor takes two separate images, projecting the implications of one image on to the other, and vice versa. In Marianne Moore's line, the swan has the image of the massive, stately battleship projected on to it. But she could, had she chosen, have continued back and forth with the projective imagery. She could have spoken of the sailors in the battleship's belly, or its webbed screws underwater, furiously thrashing while the ship retained its stately shape above the waves. Then the imagery would have been projecting from swan to battleship. She could have spoken of the swan's fuel driving it on; then the imagery is projecting from battleship to swan.

And here we come to an important point. The discussion has spoken so far as if we always have two intact and completed images, which simply allude to one another within the metaphor. Max Black, in his extensive work on the subject, was more inclined to think of metaphors actually creating the similarities which they display.[2] This is surely a useful way for the writer to think about metaphors. In other words, we do not simply reflect an existing similarity (however remote): we create one. The searching out of similarities here is dynamic and transactional.

To summarize the points made so far: a metaphor finds similarity in apparently dissimilar things or situations, and combines these different elements into a single functioning image, which retains both originals while transmuting them. It functions by projective and interactive imagery:

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[2] See Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962).

aspects of one identity are imposed upon the other, and vice versa. This 'similarity' is often not so much observed as created, or at least partly created. This creation will often be taking place through the natural figurativeness of language itself.

The topographic metaphor

One of the commonest metaphors is the topographic one. We 'map out' thoughts or inter-relationships as though they were part of a place. These lines from 'Satyr' by John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, show the topographic metaphor in action:

> *Reason*, an *Ignis fatuus*, in the *Mind*,
> Which leaving light of *Nature*, sense behind;
> Pathless and dang'rous wandring ways it takes,
> Through errors Fenny *Boggs*, and Thorny *Brakes*;
> Whilst the misguided follower, climbs with pain,
> *Mountains* of Whimseys, heaped in his own *Brain* …

Once the idea of reason as an ill-advised traveller moving across treacherous terrain begins, the imagery proliferates. Good writers, we should note, exploit to the full any metaphor's potential. So we have error, which reason is seeking to avoid, entrapping it in bogs and brakes, and then in that brilliant last line the topographic metaphor once more moves from the external landscape to the mental landscape (to continue the metaphor) inside the brain: '*Mountains* of Whimseys, heaped in his own *Brain*…'

Cliché

If a cliché is a dead metaphor, then it does not always have to be buried. A metaphor can sometimes operate like one of those resurrection men in the nineteenth century, who were adept at removing corpses from their coffins.

Here is an example:

> I took a trip down memory lane.

This is obviously a cliché. Why? Because the phrase 'memory lane' has become over-used. We should perhaps remind ourselves that phrases become clichés, often enough, because they were such good metaphors in the first place; that's why they came to be employed so often. 'Memory lane' is a topographic metaphor, as is 'the flow of time'. But there might still be some life in it, if we accept the full consequences of its topographic origination. Let's make it a place again, as it was once when the metaphor was coined:

> I don't know about you, but I've taken to avoiding trips down Memory Lane. The place grows more shabby and urinous with every visit. Last time I went wandering down amongst the ruins, I was mugged. And do you know what the voice said, from inside its hood? "Given how little you've got, Missus, you're lucky I didn't kill you."

Metaphor and Language

Metaphors occur in language, but they are also frequently employing the figure of language as part of the mechanism. 'There's something about that landscape that really speaks to me.' 'Look at the way the two figures in the painting seem to rhyme with one another.' When Macbeth utters his famous words about the futility of life, the metaphoric tropes he employs relate to language:

> To morrow and to morrow, and to morrow
>
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
>
> To the last syllable of recorded time …

Time is uttering itself as a chronicle, a sequence of spoken moments, hence 'the last syllable of recorded time'. A few lines later Macbeth will speak of life as 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. We can thrash about in language as much as we like, but if all our meanings have cut loose, as Macbeth's appear to have done, then our tale will be a parody of genuine signification.

One could go on listing types of metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnson do in *Metaphors We Live By*,[3] but the point should be clear by now. We noted how the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said the English language was a graveyard of dead metaphors. His point was that dead metaphors are dangerous, because they shape our thought without alerting us to the manner and force of the shaping. He gives as an example Saint Augustine's troubled thoughts regarding the flowing of time. He points out that the problems Augustine appears to be addressing, about the nature of time, are actually generated by the figurative language itself. It is the metaphoric figure of time as a river which shapes any thoughts one might have about the 'actual subject'; in effect it *becomes* the actual subject.

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[3] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

An example might be the word ‘gravity’. It was Isaac Newton who started using it to describe a universal law of attraction. If we say, ‘Gravity pulls the object towards the earth’, then we are actually employing a metaphor. Gravity has here been personified; it is an agency which is doing something, rather than the description of an observable phenomenon. We could easily be misled into talking about gravity pushing something in, which would be technically incorrect, since gravity, as an attractive force, must always be described as pulling.

Non-Visual Metaphors

We have spoken as though all metaphors are visual, and it is true that there is at least an element of the visual in most of them. But this is not always the case. If I say that someone is as good as gold, it is not really a visual metaphor, because gold carries its own connotations of value, whether or not we think of a yellow substance that has the number 79 in the Periodic Table. If I say her words were music to my ears, then this is not a visual metaphor at all, since it is impossible to visualize music entering an ear. Both these phrases are of course clichés, which is to say that over-use has drained them of any potency.

Conclusion

The good writer shapes metaphors which contain the maximum amount of dissonance or tension between two elements, while succeeding in finding a unity in the verbal image. In the process we see momentarily how language functions, how it shapes our perceptions, and how it offers that brief renewal of perception we often refer to as defamiliarization.