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May 2019

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POETICS, NOT PRAGMATICS :

UNDERSTANDING METAPHORS IN A POETIC CONTEXT

by

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A Thesis Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in Philosophy

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2019

ABSTRACT

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UNDERSTANDING METAPHORS IN A POETIC CONTEXT

by

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2019
Under the Supervision of Professor Peter Van Elswyk

The aim of this paper is to explain why the leading theories of metaphor fail when applied to metaphors which appear in poems. The ability to understand the true meaning of a metaphor in conversations relies on understanding speaker intention and extralinguistic context. This paper argues that because such material is not available to the reader of a poem, theories which rely heavily on pragmatics to explain metaphors cannot be successfully applied to metaphors which appear in poems. This paper makes use of the views on metaphor by John Searle and Paul Grice, and discusses how meaning is constructed in poetry, and in particular the sonnet, through Nelson Goodman's theory of symbol systems.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to outline a better understanding of how metaphors are at work in poetry. Several accounts of metaphor currently exist, one of which is known as the *pragmatic twist account.* The pragmatic twist account, which is derived primarily from the work of Paul Grice and John Searle, understands metaphor as when one thing is literally said, but another is meant.[1] While this leading account is an intuitive way of understanding how metaphors function to express meaning beyond the face value of their constitutive words in conversations, it unfortunately falls short when we attempt to use it to understand how they function within poems. How is this possible? I argue that it is precisely the account's focus on pragmatics—context and speaker, intention in particular—which causes it to fail when applied to poetry. This paper will strive to show that the context necessary for the pragmatic twist account's success is not present in poetry.

In order to understand metaphor within poetry, I will first outline a way to approach understanding poems more generally, focusing specifically on their structural and semantic qualities. I will then move on to describe the pragmatic twist account of metaphor before identifying the specific points of the view which fail in application to poetry. The paper will close with some brief remarks about where this critique leads us in our effort to understand metaphor more generally.

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[1] Hills, David, "Metaphor", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition)

How A Poem Means: A Systematic Approach

Metaphors which appear in poems are only one of a poem's many parts. It is necessary to consider how poems construct their meaning in a broader sense before focusing on metaphors specifically. Nelson Goodman's theory of symbols, put forward in his *Languages of Art*,[2] is a useful framework for understanding poetry. He posits that there are several types of objects—scores, dance notations, maps, diagrams, pictures—which all rely on a systemic construction of meaning: "Symbol systems consist in sets of marks (or designs) together with principles mapping them onto domains comprised of their subjects."[3] Within these systems, sets of symbols are denotations which, once the rules of their unique system are understood, can be 'read' and therefor understood themselves. One of the goals of Goodman's text was to expand the notions of structural linguistics beyond just languages to include other forms of representation.[4] The specifics of his theory aren't strictly necessary for our purposes; what I hope to add by referencing him here is a framework for thinking about the text of a poem as not simply a string of words, but as a complex system with parts which interact with each other in order to construct the whole.

In a broad, generic sense, individual poems are systems whose symbols are properties such as line length, rhyme schemes, other sound devices (like anaphora or assonance), prosodic patterns, rhetorical devices, and metaphors. The notion of poems as systems is supported by the idea that one must *learn* to read them.[5] Many adults who are otherwise competent readers often struggle with gleaning anything substantial from

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[2] Goodman, Nelson, *Languages Of Art,* The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1968
[3] Lopes, Dominic, 57, *Understanding Pictures,* Oxford University Press, 2004
[4] Goodman, xi
[5] Thanks to Rachel Goodman for bringing this point to my attention. Although the point is made in *Languages of Art* in reference to reading pictorial systems, I had not thought to apply it poetry.

poems, the often repeated response of "I don't get it" can be taken as an indication of a reader's sense that something beyond their comprehension is at work in the piece at hand.

A useful example of poem-as-system can be found in the sonnet. On their most basic definition, sonnets are 14-line poems, written in verse, which often utilize distinct rhyme schemes. But from here they diverge considerably, and the type of sonnet at hand becomes relevant in understanding a poem's meaning. Of the several types of sonnets, the most common in English are the Elizabethan (sometimes called Shakespearean), and the Petrarchan (or Italian). Elizabethan sonnets are constructed with their 14 lines split into three quatrains and a concluding couplet. The rhyme scheme typically supports this organization, running *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*. Furthermore, the physical structure of the poem supports its logical development: the quatrains build successively on a single idea, while the couplet offers a final say, a finality underlined by the change in rhyme and the closure it offers. "She had forgotten how the August night," by Edna St. Vincent Millay[6] is a prime example of this type of sonnet, despite its irregular line length in line 14:

> 1. She had forgotten how the August night (a)
> 2. Was level as a lake beneath the moon, (b)
> 3. In which she swam a little, losing sight (a)
> 4. Of shore; and how the boy, who was at noon (b)
>
> 5. Simple enough, not different from the rest,(c)
> 6. Wore now a pleasant mystery as he went, (d)
> 7. Which seemed to her an honest enough test (c)
> 8. Whether she loved him, and she was content. (d)
>
> 9. So loud, so loud the million crickets' choir. . . (e)
> 10. So sweet the night, so long-drawn-out and late. . . (f)

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[6] This poem, as well as "The New Colossus" and "Pity me not because the light of day" are all in the public domain, and may be accessed through the Poetry Foundation.

11. And if the man were not her spirit's mate, (e)
12. Why was her body sluggish with desire? (f)

13. Stark on the open field the moonlight fell, (g)
14. But the oak tree's shadow was deep and black and secret as a well. (g)

While sonnets are typically arranged within a single stanza, I have broken this one apart and added the letters at the end of each line to indicate rhyme. Laid out this way, it easy to see how the poem develops over its own structure: lines 1-4 discuss the "August night," the setting, lines 5-8 discuss the speaker's longing for the transformed companion, lines 9-12 further develop both of these points, while the couplet abruptly mentions neither. Instead, the final two lines describe the moonlit field, presumably vacant, and the black shadow of the tree, presumably occupied by the lovers, resolving the speaker's internal questions.

The final line, as mentioned previously, is too long by six beats. This is not sloppiness, but is done to a certain effect: because the line holds the resolution of the couplet, the addition of the extra beats suspends the effect of the rhyme. Further, because the syntactic structure of the sentence piles descriptions upon itself with the repetitive use of "and" rather than constructing a list, the shadow of the oak tree is presented as layered and complex compared to the simplicity of the description of line 13's open field. The stress pattern of the line is also irregular. While the rest of the poem is written in relatively tight iambic pentameter, line 14 looks like this:

˘ ˘ ´ , ´ , ´ , ˘ ˘ , ´ ˘ , ´ ˘ , ˘ ´ , ˘ ´

But the | oak tree's | shadow | was deep | and black | and se|cret as | a well.

The final five feet actually *do* form a regular iambic line, so the added irregular feet essentially serve to suspend the resolution of the final couplet. While "deep" and "black" are both single syllable words contained within one foot, "secret" has its syllables split

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between two feet, breaking with the previously established pattern. The hidden quality of the lover's intimacy is emphasized by this manipulation of syllables.

With all of this analysis in mind, it easier to see how a poem might come to be viewed as a system. From the sonnet's rhyme scheme, logical structure, use of syntax, imagery, and stress pattern, we can come to glean the overall meaning of the poem as a systemic one which relies on all of its parts together in order to communicate. Indeed, had the poem been written as a different type of sonnet, or without a fixed form at all, it would not be the same poem.

Considering a different sonnet type will serve to underscore the power of the formal structure of the poem upon its meaning and support this argument. Rather than three quatrains and a couplet, the Petrarchan sonnet utilizes an octave and a sestet, with rhyme scheme *abbaabba, cdcdcd*. The beginning of the sestet contains what is known as the *volta* (Italian for "turn"), which is the main thrust behind the logical development of the Petrarchan sonnet, also upheld by the poem's rhyme scheme. Emma Lazarus' poem "The New Colossus," which sits at the bottom of the Statue of Liberty, is an excellent example:

> 1. Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, (a)
> 2. With conquering limbs astride from land to land; (b)
> 3. Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand (b)
> 4. A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame (a)
> 5. Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name (a)
> 6. MOTHER OF EXILES. From her beacon-hand (b)
> 7. Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command (b)
> 8. The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame. (a)
> 9. "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she (c)
> 10. With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, (d)
> 11. Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, (c)
> 12. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. (d)
> 13. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, (c)
> 14. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" (d)

While the first eight lines of the poem describe the statue itself compared to her predecessor, the Colossus of Rhodes, the final six lines of the poem allow the statue herself to speak. She declares her purpose by addressing the "ancient lands" and underscoring her difference from the old Colossus, built to celebrate a military victory and the splendor of the ancient city. Compared to the Millay poem, Lazarus' sonnet develops at a slightly slower pace, its main points proven over only two sections. This dichotomy further emphasizes the difference in images; despite the statue's almost divine glory, she is the "mother" of the hungry, the poor, and the wretched.

Now that the general structure of the sonnet system has been laid out, we can begin to look specifically how a metaphor, as a symbol within a system, might be working. Millay gives us a good example again with "Pity me not because the light of day:"

1. Pity me not because the light of day (a)
2. At close of day no longer walks the sky; (b)
3. Pity me not for beauties passed away (a)
4. From field and thicket as the year goes by; (b)
5. Pity me not the waning of the moon, (c)
6. Nor that the ebbing tide goes out to sea, (d)
7. Nor that a man's desire is hushed so soon, (c)
8. And you no longer look with love on me. (d)
9. This have I known always: Love is no more (e)
10. Than the wide blossom which the wind assails, (f)
11. Than the great tide that treads the shifting shore, (e)
12. Strewing fresh wreckage gathered in the gales: (f)
13. Pity me that the heart is slow to learn (g)
14. What the swift mind beholds at every turn. (g)

This is another example of an Elizabethan sonnet, so we can assume that some of the logical development of her previously discussed poem is also at work here. What is of real interest is the metaphor which takes place over lines 9-12. It aligns Love with both a

"wide blossom" attacked by wind, and also with the "great tide" which leaves the shore altered and strewn with debris.

Observe first the location of the metaphor within the poem: in line nine, after a colon, which adds emphasis and demarcates the beginning of metaphorical language. But more important is that the metaphor comes at the beginning of the third quatrain, after the completion of the rhyme sets, and likewise breaks with the previous pattern of "Pity me not. . ." and "Nor that. . .". For theses reasons, we can tell that the metaphor is not just important, but is in fact at the center of the force of the poem.

The metaphor splits into two parts: the first states that Love is a "wide blossom" which the winds attack, their wideness likening them to sails such that their very nature—Love's very nature—is to be moved. In the second part, Love is the "great tide" which alters the shoreline and deposits debris from the ocean. It is not too difficult to generate a surface understanding of the metaphor: Love is vulnerable and indifferent, capable of being damaged and enacting damage at once. These lines are given greater depth, however, when we understand them in the context of the eight previous. The setting of the sun, the fading of the seasons, the changing moon and tides, and a man's fleeting love are all described as natural phenomena, not worth "pity" or sadness. By comparing Love to such natural occurrences as flower petals being blown away by wind, and the sea ravaging the shore during a storm, the speaker implies Love's nature is not to be pitied either. It is the speaker's knowledge in this case, their ability to observe the natural world and its activities that we are meant to pity them for, because although their mind is quick to understand the realities of the world around them, their heart is "slow to learn."

Again, these developing ideas are clearly supported by the poem's structure. While the final couplet of the poem gives us the true theme of the work, it is the quatrain which contains the metaphor that acts as the crucial bridge between the setup of that theme and its presentation. And while the poem needs the metaphor for its success, the metaphor is at best incomplete without the rest of the poem. I will discuss this point further in a later section.

The Pragmatic View of Metaphor: Grice & Searle

We will now turn to the best existing theory of metaphor, known as the pragmatic twist account. This account consists of Grice's[7] foundational account of conversational maxims, and a three-step account of how metaphors operate by Searle[8]. This section will first seek to explicate the basics of Grice's view, before turning to Searle. Searle has in fact built his theory of metaphor out of what he views as a failing of Grice's, namely, that on Grice's view there is no adequate explanation for how the literal leads to the figurative. But there is more beyond that, as Grice's conversational maxims also help construct the "pragmatic" in the pragmatic twist account.

Conversational maxims exist to guide the expectations participants have for one another's utterances. We endeavor to be charitable, and assume unless given very good reason otherwise, that speakers are trying to communicate something to us. Metaphors often flout one or more of these maxims, particularly the maxim of quality, that we be truthful. The phrase "Steven is a teddy bear" is literally false when used to describe a

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[7] While I primarily built my own understanding of Grice's view from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry, "Metaphor," it can be found in its original form in *Studies in the Way of Words,* Harvard University Press, 1989.
[8] Searle, John R., 1979a, "Metaphor," in *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 76-116.

human, but this violation of maxims may cue conversational participants to the fact that figurative language is at use in the first place. Realizing that a sentence can't possibly be literally true but assuming that a speaker wishes to be cooperative in their communication induces hearers to seek the real meaning of their utterance beyond what was actually said.[9]

John Searle's view on metaphor contains two important presupposed or background facts, in addition to a three-step understanding of how metaphors are processed in conversation. First, he labels the word- or sentence-meaning as the literal meaning of an utterance, and second, the utterance's metaphorical meaning as the "speaker's utterance meaning."[10] This distinction is an important on for Searle, who claims that sentences have only the meanings they have, rather than one literal and one metaphorical. The speaker's utterance meaning is something strictly extralinguistic, so when we consider it, we are "therefore, talking about possible speaker's intentions."[11] Searle's three-step view of metaphorical utterances is as follows:[12]

1. Upon hearing an utterance ("S is P"), the hearer must decide whether or not a metaphor is taking place. They may be cued to this if the utterance contains an obvious falsehood when taken literally, is "semantic nonsense," violates the rules of speech acts, etc.

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[9] It is worth noting that speakers will often violate one conversational maxim in order to fulfill the others. In the case of metaphors, it may be that a speaker chooses to violate the quality maxim in order to express something economically, thus fulfilling the maxim of appropriate quantity.
[10] Searle, 84
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 103

2. The hearer then computes possible metaphorical values for the literal sentence "S is P" by searching for ways *S* is like *P*, or any distinctive features of *P*, when *P* is taken literally.

3. The hearer then restricts the set of all possible metaphorical values to only the relevant possible values, given the context in which "S is P" was uttered, to produce the metaphorical "S is R," where *R* is the speaker's utterance meaning.

One of Searle's major concerns in this paper is to explain just how we are capable of moving from the literal understanding of *S* as *P* to the metaphorical understanding of *S* as *R*. That is, what is the relationship between *P* and *R* in regards to *S* such that metaphors communicate anything at all? He offers some "principles" for performing step two, in which possible meanings are generated.[13] For example: Things which are *P* are by definition *R,* such that *R* is one of the salient defining characteristics of *P;* things which are *P* are contingently *R,* such that *R* is a well known property of *P;* either natural or cultural sensibility causes is to perceive connections between *R* and *P*.

In average conversations, these rules apply easily. In a conversation between two people about a friend's disposition, the metaphor "Steven (S) is a teddy bear (P)" is easily recovered as meaning something like "Despite the fact that Steven is large and could be thought of as intimidating, he's actually gentle and sweet (R)." The two friends are both familiar with the third person, are aware of the conversation's topic being his disposition (rather than the shape of his ears or snout), and are familiar with the metaphor itself. The hearer of such an utterance has also made an estimation, given the

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[13] Ibid., 104-105; while Searle lists eight such principles for generation, I have only included three here.

context of the utterance and the disposition of the speaker, that the speaker wishes to speak kindly about Steven, rather than to use the metaphor to say something negative.

Critiques of the View

Presupposed in Grice's view is the fact that conversations inherently take place between a speaker and hearer. Thus, an obvious point of difference between metaphors in dialogue and in poetry is the players involved. While conversations obviously have speakers and hearers, poems do not. It is generally accepted that poems have "speakers," that is, they are interpreted as not reflecting the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, etc. of their authors, but of some other constructed persona. A poem's speaker is thus a conceit used to get the poem "off the ground" as a work of art, a device rather than an actual person. The speaker of a poem has no wants, no desires, no attitudes, no intentions beyond the text of the poem itself. There is thus nothing pragmatic to be gathered about this speaker; we are left with only the semantics of the poem to construct them and everything about their existence.

This is obviously quite different from the speaker in a real conversation. As a complete person, they *do* have attitudes and intentions which are at least partially available to their hearer to assist in recovering their metaphorical meaning. A speaker's tone of voice and facial expression can cue other conversational participants to irony or sarcasm, while slouching body language and a lack of eye contact might indicate discomfort or embarrassment as the reason for indirect or non-literal speech. Likewise, a real conversation has both a speaker and a hearer, who generally trade the two roles between themselves. Readers, however, do not have the ability to ask questions of a

poem's speaker; they instead must piece together the meaning of the poem using only the text available to them.

There are some poems in which the speaker is quite well developed,[14] and in those cases restricting the meaning of a metaphor based on attitudes might be possible. In most cases, however, it will not be a speaker's intention which allows us to decode a metaphor's meaning within a poem, and it won't be the poet's, either. Debate about what kinds of authorial intentions exist and are allowed in the understanding of a literary work has been ongoing since the middle of the twentieth century. My own view is derived from Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intention Fallacy," in which they argue that works of literature must be judged on their literal contents alone.[15] They classify a writer's intention as their design or plan for their work, including their attitude towards the piece and what propelled them to write in the first place. But "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable" for understanding a work, they state.[16] Temporarily setting aside the desirability claim, we might consider if a poet's intention would potentially be useful in understanding a metaphor deployed by a poet. The answer to that is probably yes. But are those intentions accessible to us as readers? No. Wimsatt and Beardsley actually argue that intentions are not always even available to poets themselves, much less their readers. What we are fit to include in our analysis of the poem is that which is "internal" to it, and not its writer: "the semantics and syntax of a poem, through our habitual knowledge of language, through grammars, dictionaries, and all the literature which is the source of dictionaries."[17]

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[14] See "To His Coy Mistress," by Andrew Marvell, or Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus."
[15] Wimsatt, W. K., and M. C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 54, no. 3, 1946, pp. 468–488
[16] Ibid., 468
[17] Ibid., 477

Returning to the desirability of authorial intention, what would be the fun, or the beauty, or the point in reading a poem, if readers could just ask the poet to summarize it instead, or decode the bits which are puzzling? Such a line of questioning is what Wimsatt and Beardsley mean when they say authorial intention is "undesirable"—it ruins the experience of the poem. But beyond that, there is also something to be said about the success and failure of a work: if a poem is such that readers cannot understand it to the point that they would ask an author what it means, the work has failed in a way. Art objects should be able to stand independently of their creators; asking a poet to explain their metaphor means that something in the work has gone very wrong.

For their part, readers of poems are given a difficult task. Like hearers, they passively receive information through a linguistic medium; but unlike participants in a conversation, they cannot ask questions, and they have no extralinguistic content to make use of. The process of reading a poem relies on the reader's having learned to read one in the first place. Recall that on Goodman's theory, a system contains its symbols *and* a set of principles which guides their reading. Readers approach a poem with at least knowledge of the language it's written in; but to get the most out of a poem—including whatever metaphors it contains—a reader must also understand something of the system of poetry itself.

With these developed notions of poetic speakers and readers, the privilege Searle's view gives to (conversational) speaker intention as a key factor for understanding a metaphor becomes highly problematic. The "speaker utterance meaning" he refers to is largely informed by what attitudes a hearer assumes or guesses a speaker has about a particular subject. For instance, if Julia says that her mother is the

sun, she might be saying that her mother is the center of her universe, enables her life, or brings her warmth. But she also might mean that her mother's intensity is damaging, too close and too hot for comfort. Only knowledge of speaker intention—Julia's attitudes toward her mother more generally, the topic of conversation at hand—can tell us what Julia's metaphor really means. Such extralinguistic context cannot be supposed or found within a poem. Given that poems are not conversations between speakers and hearers, the rules which guide conversations cannot be said to apply. Readers employ their learned principles of understanding poetry, not Grice's conversational maxims. Indeed, such maxims often feel wrong in application to poetry and its metaphors.

For example, need the speaker of a poem be *truthful*? Not necessarily. Poetry has no obligation to be "true;" it is akin to something like fiction, whereby the so-called facts stated or the events described have truth values which are irrelevant to a work's success *qua* art. Goodman also suggests that metaphors in particular have different truth functionality all together.[18] On his theory, metaphorical truth is more about the aptness of a label or a comparison, rather than some appeal to logic or fact. Readers of poems do not approach them with the expectation of truth, or even necessarily the desire to be told something about the word. While poets may employ them for the sake of economy, as traditional conversational speakers do, they need not be concerned about sacrificing the truth value of their expression. This maxim is therefor not useful for understanding poetic metaphor.

Poets may be concerned about economy, but is there really an appropriate scope for the *quantity* of communication in poems? This question feels like the wrong one to

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[18] Goodman, 70

ask, as the literal number of lines doesn't necessarily correlate with the amount of information communicated in a poem. Some are hundreds of lines long, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost,* while others, like Haikus, are only three. Poetic metaphors must fit within the poems that contain them, but they otherwise have no quantity restriction. They may be extended, articulating themselves throughout the entirety of the poem; some may take up less than a line; neither are more correct, only more felicitous for the poem's purpose. This maxim, too, fails to provide us with any useful insight.

The *relevancy* of a particular metaphor in a poem is also difficult to gage in comparison to conversations. It is very difficult to label a phrase or line infelicitous in a poem; a poem may change the question under discussion at will, and sometimes precisely the point of a juxtaposed or odd phrase is to produce an awkward tension. Even if a metaphor seems irrelevant on first read, it may be that perhaps the job of a reader is to work at unpacking its relevancy.

Finally, there just is no agreement between the speaker of a poem and its reader to be *cooperative*, or to communicate in a manner that is "clear, unambiguous, or efficient."[19] We have established that a reader is not precisely the same as a hearer, in that they have no ability to ask questions of the poem, and that a poetic speaker is not the same as a conversational speaker, whose goal is to practically communicate and move their conversation forward. Poetic speakers may revel in their own ambiguity, in the sense that they may not be trying to communicate anything at all. Poetry, as literature, is *art;* it's word *play,* it's fun with sound and rhythm, irony and imagery. To

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[19]Hills, "Metaphor"

demand or even expect cooperation on the part of the poem would, at times, be antithetical to its goal.

With this understanding of the failure of Gricean maxims to guide the reading of poems, we return to Searle's three-step account to examine its potential flaws. Recall his account to consist of identifying when a metaphor is in use, the generation of potential meanings, and the restriction of those meanings to the most apt. Step one in this process is fairly similar when applied to poetic metaphors. The biggest problem is that poets may occasionally embed their metaphors unclearly within their syntax. In particular, verse forms which require particular patterns of stressed beats may produce unusual syntactic choices. Or, at least, unusual as compared to conversational syntax. The inclusion of appositives or repeated subordinate clauses, for example, or the need to maintain a five-beat line may result in the separation of a vehicle from its tenor. A reader may fail to recognize a metaphor or misidentify it as another rhetorical device, such as metonymy, synecdoche, or personification.

Searle's second step poses more difficulties. The generation of possible meaning for a metaphor is context-sensitive, but what determines that context will be different for conversations and poems. To consider ways in which P might be related to R, both the subject S and the conversation at hand—including any extralinguistic material—are considered. It is more complicated for the reader of a poem for several reasons: first, poets have the privilege of being able to say, frankly, whatever they'd like. The previous lines of a poem often offer very little predictive power for future lines. Second, poets generally tend to utilize highly original metaphors in their work, meaning they are likely to be unfamiliar to readers. Goodman points out that familiarity with metaphors effects

our ability to understand them;[20] metaphors which are particularly useful or "economical" tend to become more colloquial, and are therefore less ambiguous to conversational participants. Poets, though, as artists, do not have only such efficiency in mind when they employ a metaphor. Rather, they might also be comparing two things which are seemingly unlike in order to reveal some new facts about the objects, ideas, or world at hand.

Refer to our earlier example, "Steven is a teddy bear." In addition to the conversational participants knowing such extra-linguistic context about Steven and his disposition, they are also likewise familiar with the teddy bear metaphor. They know that the use of such a metaphor is meant to communicate something like Steven is deceptively gentle, unexpectedly kind, etc. Compare this to Millay's metaphor, " Love is no more / Than the wide blossom which the wind assails." We might understand something about Love as a blossom blown by wind, but any further meanings are less clear. We need more information in order to generate a proper list of potential meanings; is the comparison about Love *qua* emotion? Is it meant to ascribe certain dispositional qualities to Love? Is it attempting to place Love within the context of the natural world? Attempting to utilize the most salient qualities in this situation is ineffectual, for what are the salient qualities of flowers blowing through the wind? In this case there is nothing essential enough about *P* that we may gather possible metaphorical meanings using only the metaphor. Because no speaker intention is available to us either, we must consult the other lines of the poem to generate a list of metaphorical meanings.

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[20] Goodman, 80

Searle's third step, the restriction of possible meanings to the correct one(s), faces the most complication when applied to poetic metaphors. In his original account, he gives very little insight into how such restriction is to occur in the first place, stating the "most common strategy" for doing so is to "Go back to the S term and see which of the many candidates for the values of R are likely or even possible properties of S."[21] Even when applied to conversational metaphors, this seems weak, and only through extralinguistic content are we capable of considering which meaning is more "intended by the speaker."[22] If the key feature of the restriction mechanism is inference based on speaker intention, and we have previously shown that such an intention does not exist in poems, then a different method of restriction must be employed.

Recall again our discussion of Millay's "Pity me not because the light of day." We arrived at both the potential meanings of the metaphor and their restriction only by considering the text of the poem as a whole, and the metaphor as a part within that whole. The metaphor's location within the poem at line nine (the beginning of a new quatrain), the metaphor's natural imagery in the context of the previous descriptions of nature, and Love's accepted nature juxtaposed with speaker's own shortcomings that give us the full thrust of the metaphorical meaning of the sentences. For conversational metaphors, recovering a meaning is essentially eliminating those that seem unlikely. But with poems, the search is for meanings which sit at the center of a complex Venn diagram, or which allow all the faces of a Rubik's cube to reflect a single color. That is, we must have appropriately read lines one through eight to make sense of our metaphor at line nine; our understanding of the final couplet is dependent on all of the preceding

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[21] Searle, 104
[22] Ibid., 102

lines; and we only understand the 'correct' nature of Love once it is placed in tension with the facts from lines 13-14.

Here is an additional example, one which further exemplifies a Rubik's cube-like structure. Sylvia Plath's "Metaphors"[23] is a free verse poem which riffs on the concept of the metaphor itself:

1. I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
2. An elephant, a ponderous house,
3. A melon strolling on two tendrils.
4. O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
5. This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
6. Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
7. I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
8. I've eaten a bag of green apples,
9. Boarded the train there's no getting off.

This poem is not a sonnet, but it nevertheless relies on its formal qualities to construct its meaning. The poem has several metaphors, beginning with the speaker's primary declaration that they are a riddle. The poem contains extremely little contextual information, our speaker appearing only twice as simply an "I." The rest of the poem is quite literally all metaphors; how are we supposed to recover any meaning when beyond one metaphor is only more figurative language?

We may begin to generate a list of potential meanings for each metaphor relatively easily. The first line, "I'm a riddle," cues the reader to the fact that more figurative language is on the way. In line 2 for example, the speaker states they are an elephant and a ponderous house, so we might be able to recover something by way of similarities between the size of elephants and their clumsiness implied by "ponderous." But we need all of the poem's metaphors in combination with its structure to gather

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[23] Plath, Sylvia, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, Heinemann, 1960.

more complete information. The fact that the speaker-as-riddle has nine syllables from line 1, that each line has nine syllables, and that the poem has nine total lines, cues us that this number is important to the poem's overall meaning. Line 7 gives us the most direct metaphor, "a cow in calf," but without the metaphors in lines 5 and 6, its intended meaning is less obvious. Thus it is only by line 9's somewhat fatalistic remark that we might gather that the poem is a series of metaphors about pregnancy, its duration of course being nine months.

One "principle" of understanding the poetic system is that the whole of a poem might not be understood on the first try; readers may need multiple passes at a work before properly piecing it together. It is only by restricting each of these metaphors in tandem with one another that we are capable of coming to the correct conclusions[24] about each of them, and thus about the poem as a whole.

Conclusion

This aim of this paper has been to develop a better understanding of how metaphor is at work in poetry. It has successfully described a leading account of metaphor in the pragmatic twist account, as well as a system of poetic meaning. It has also explained why, in the context of that system, a pragmatic account of metaphors cannot be successfully applied to poems.

This paper has not, however, addressed two issues central to the subject at hand. First, it has not given an explicit account of how the meaning of a metaphor in a poem is

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[24] Whether or not there is a single "correct" interpretation of a metaphor is a further point of contention. Grice would argue there is a unique interpretation, while Searle would argue that some are more correct than others, and that more than one may be correct simultaneously. For poetry, a Searlean approach makes the most sense, so long as we keep in mind that the process of determination of correct interpretations ("restrictions") of metaphors is different for poems than it is for conversations.

recovered. Although such an account might be developed out of what I have presented, as it stands, my theory of poetry as a symbol system is not adequate. It does pose a significant problem for the advocate of a pragmatic account of metaphors, however, which leads us to our second issue. Where does this critique leave us in our quest to understand how metaphors work?

There are two options. First, we can accept the necessity for multiple accounts of metaphor. This would allow us to keep the pragmatic twist account for conversations, and would require the development of a new account for poetry. But it also might mean that we end up with as many accounts as there are forms of linguistic media; as a rhetorical device, metaphor occurs in speeches, plays, novels, poems, essays, conversations, etc., which might cause us to wonder how useful several separate accounts would really be. Our second option is to continue to strive for a single account of metaphor. Because there is no distinguishing principle of any of the 'types' of metaphors, I advocate that we should strive for a unified theory. While this paper obviously cannot go much further in this debate, it is my hope that it has at least motivated a reconsideration of pragmatic accounts.

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