

## CHAPTER ONE

---

### *The Talent for Metaphor*

---

Nonetheless, I agree that there *is* a pictorial dimension to metaphor and that the perspective it generates cannot be expressed propositionally.

—JOSEF STERN<sup>1</sup>

We may, therefore, regard the metaphorical sentence as a “Duck-Rabbit”; it is a sentence that may simultaneously be regarded as presenting two different situations; looked at one way, it describes the actual situation, and looked at the other way, an hypothetical situation with which that situation is being compared.

—ROGER WHITE<sup>2</sup>

THERE is mystery at the heart of metaphor. During the past several years a number of capable authors have done much to clarify the topic, and they have shown that some earlier central theses about the nature of metaphor are untenable.<sup>3</sup> What they

<sup>1</sup> *Metaphor in Context* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 289.

<sup>2</sup> *The Structure of Metaphor* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> This book makes no effort to contribute to the literature on the topic of metaphor as such. It aims only to claim that the construction and comprehension of metaphors, however those things may be done, require an ability that is the same as the human capacity for understanding one another. There are now two excellent book-length philosophical treatments of metaphor. Anyone wishing acquaintance with this topic can do no better than starting with them, and I don’t see any other way of doing as well. These texts are not only virtually definitive of the best current work on the topic, but they are also excellent

have shown, in particular, is that the import of a significant metaphor cannot be delivered literally, that is, in general, that a metaphorical statement has no literal statement that is its equivalent.

It may or may not be prudent to regard the import of a metaphor as a *meaning*. If it is, then a metaphorical sentence has two meanings, one literal and one metaphorical. If not, then there is only one meaning, the literal meaning, and the metaphorical import has to be understood in another way. But in either case there will be a metaphorical import that a competent audience will grasp. How the audience does this is, in the end, a mystery.

In the case of a metaphor of the form '*A is B*', some comparison is indicated of the properties of *A* with the properties of *B*. An early idea, persistent at least since Aristotle, is that this comparison can be made explicit in a formulation of the form '*A is like B*' and this leads to the further idea that the import of the metaphor can be expressed as an explicit, literal comparison of *A* with *B*.

Both ideas are mistaken, the second more seriously misleading than the first. The first idea, on its face, is simply and wildly implausible. In general, and certainly in the case of literal statements, '*A is B*' and '*A is like B*' are not equivalent. For instance, 'Aristotle is like Plato' is true: they are both Greek, both Athenians, both philosophers, both long dead, &c, while 'Aristotle is Plato' is false. There is no compelling reason to think that this obvious nonequivalence disappears when '*A is B*' happens to be a metaphor, unless, of course, it were the case that a metaphor '*A is B*' is somehow, perhaps by convention, to be understood as an alternative formulation of the literal simile '*A is like B*', and there seems no good reason to suppose this to be the case.

The second idea is that the '*A is like B*' associated with the metaphor '*A is B*' is not itself metaphorical but is literal, and as seductive as this idea has been, it is mistaken. The mistake can be exposed using the useful if timeworn example 'Juliet is the

---

bibliographic guides. These are the books by Josef Stern and Roger White cited in the footnotes to this chapter's epigraphs.

sun'. If the import of Romeo's declaration were a literal comparison expressed in 'Juliet is like the sun', then the relevant comparison would be of properties literally possessed by both Juliet and the sun. There is no shortage of such properties: both Juliet and the sun occupy space, have mass, are visible, &c. But these properties are irrelevant to what Romeo hopes to communicate. What matters are these other shared properties: both Juliet and the sun are warming, they both illuminate Romeo's world, &c. And these properties—the significant ones—are indeed literal properties of the sun, but they are metaphorical properties of Juliet.

So even if a metaphor were "reducible" to a simile or similes (already a dubious reduction), many of the most important similes themselves would also be figurative, not literal. Of course there often are literal similarities, especially in the cases I am most interested in, those in which I imagine myself to be another person. When I imagine myself to be King David, for instance, it is obviously relevant that both he and I are men, both heterosexually active, both tempted to injure others in pursuit of our own desires, and so on.

It seems obviously true that a metaphor '*A* is *B*' induces one to think of *A* as *B*, and this leads to new thoughts about *A*. How this happens is a wonderful mystery, and the ability to do it, to "see" *A* as *B*, is an indispensable human ability I am calling the talent for metaphor. This is a talent not just for making a metaphor or grasping one, not if one thinks of that only in terms of producing or understanding a single sentence. The talent is not restricted in this way: in fact it is a talent for seizing metaphors and then enlarging and altering them.

Here is a relatively elaborate metaphor from Richard Stern:<sup>4</sup>

There are, I think, three very different sorts of literary experience: the writer's the reader's, and the critic's, the last two being as distinct as the first from them. . . . If we analogize the writer to an assassin, the reader is the corpse, the critic the coroner-detective.

<sup>4</sup> This is from his essay "Henderson's Bellow," *Kenyon Review* 21, no. 4 (1959). The essay is reprinted in a number of places, including Stern's book *One Person and Another* (Dallas: Baskerville, 1993).

This figure is a perfect illustration of two features common to metaphorical language although not always so strikingly present. First is a metaphor's capacity to suggest other, related metaphors, almost by implication. Thus if you think of a critic as someone explaining the effect of a book upon a reader, and you then think of a coroner as someone who paradigmatically explains effects, you think of the critic as a coroner, and this leads to seeing the reader as a victim and the author as his victimizer, and, although Stern does not bother to note this, it leads to thinking of the book itself as a weapon. Given this much, a competent metaphor appreciator is led to much, much more. Perhaps Tolstoy kills with large, overpowering weapons, while Proust sedates you to death. What about Hemingway? Does he use a machine gun? A sniper rifle? And then, undoubtedly, you will recall the virtually idiomatic response to a joker, "You slay me." And on and on.

But second, you may resist the metaphor or some part of it. It is extraordinary and very striking that Stern thinks of a writer as a killer.<sup>5</sup> If you don't see writers in that way, but are still struck by the irresistible aptness of Stern's designation of the critic as someone like a pathologist, someone seeking to understand the effect upon a reader of what he reads, then what will you do to amend Stern's figures? Perhaps you think of a novelist as a therapist, improving the muscle tone or endurance of his reader, and then the critic becomes perhaps the judge in a body-building contest, or, better, a doctor who appraises your health after you submitted to the therapist he recommended, and can explain just why the therapy had this effect.

Both ways of thinking of writing metaphorically, of course, lead to the endlessly beguiling question of why the reader submits to the author's ministrations. In Stern's figure, we must ask, why does one expose oneself to an assassin? I don't know

<sup>5</sup> Stern stands by his metaphor, and has told me, "I do think of a book as a way of annihilating the reader, that is substituting the powerful structure of the book for what was there before." The depth of Stern's thinking about these matters is underwritten by his being, himself, a very accomplished writer of fiction and also nonfictional essays, a critic, and a voracious reader.

Stern's answer, but I think it must be wonderful to contemplate. In the substitute figure, the question of why one goes to a therapist is less interesting, less potent, but still instructive.

Calling a writer an assassin is perhaps an uncomplimentary reference to the writer, although I doubt Stern thinks of his metaphor in this way. Many metaphors are intended, precisely, to be devices for saying negative things about their subjects.

Suppose you wish to say something uncomplimentary about Bart, and you mean to do it using a metaphor. You will say that Bart is an *X*, and the result will be an unpleasant depiction of Bart. You have to choose some noun to put in place of '*X*', and there are, surprisingly, two classes of candidates. In the more obvious choice, you will pick the name of something inherently disagreeable, say the word 'maggot'. This gives 'Bart is a maggot', a mean thing, indeed, to say when speaking of Bart. On the other hand, there is nothing intrinsically unpleasant or disagreeable about dogs, and yet if you choose 'dog' for '*X*', you will get 'Bart is a dog', which might well be an insult to Bart.

An historical example of a choice of the second kind, of something not in itself negative, is Churchill's remark about Mussolini, 'Mussolini is a utensil'.<sup>6</sup> There is nothing whatever negative in calling a fork or a knife or a screwdriver a utensil, but something happens when Mussolini is seen as a utensil.

There are two lessons to be learned from these examples, the first interesting but less problematic than the second. The first lesson is that whether or not metaphors have new *meanings*, and whether or not the principal use of a metaphor is to communicate the speaker's feeling about his subject, it remains true that different choices of predicates give different imports. Churchill might have called Mussolini a wolf or the devil or a parasite, but none of those has the same import as calling him a utensil.

<sup>6</sup> The remark is adapted from "Prime Minister Winston Churchill's Address to the Congress of the United States, December 26, 1941," as recorded by the British Library of Information. What Churchill said was, "The boastful Mussolini has crumpled already. He is now but a lackey and a serf, the merest utensil of his master's will."

That is, whether or not this is strictly a matter of semantics, there are relatively specific imports or depictions of ideas presented in metaphors, including those meant to insult or degrade. To think of Mussolini as a swine is to be uncomplimentary to Mussolini, no doubt, but to think of him as a utensil is, among other things, to think of him in his relation to Hitler, which is significantly more specific, and, one might say, even more accurate and informative.

The second lesson is that the mystery of metaphor—the mystery of one thing’s being seen or thought of as another—is even more enigmatic than one might have expected. To see Bart as a maggot is to see Bart in a rather poor light, so to speak, but that seems to be because maggots are already in bad repute. But seeing Bart as a dog, or Mussolini as a utensil is different. Something happens when one sees Mussolini as a utensil that also puts Mussolini in a bad light, but not because of any negative association with utensils. It is Mussolini-seen-as-a-utensil that is disagreeable.

When one sees something as an *X*, one is seeing a new entity, a kind of compound. To see Bart as a maggot is to see something disagreeable, and to see anything as a maggot would be to see something disagreeable. To see Mussolini as a utensil is to see something distasteful, but not because anything seen in that way would be distasteful—for instance, one might see language as a utensil.

The overall lesson, which connects this observation to Arnold Isenberg’s idea of “critical communication,” is that a leading aim of many metaphor-makers is the communication of some feelings they have about the subjects of their metaphors, and the often hoped-for inducement of similar feelings in those who grasp their metaphors. Both the description, say, of Mussolini, and the attendant feeling are specific. Churchill did not want only to present Mussolini in a bad light, but to present him lit in a very specific way, and he wanted not only for us to feel negatively about *Il Duce*, but to have the feelings that go with thinking of Mussolini as a utensil. Mussolini might well also have been a swine, but that is different, a different depiction with a different attendant feeling.

Metaphorical sentences come in all forms—imperative, interrogative, and so on—but the only concern here is with those that are declarative sentences, sentences used for making statements, and among those the only interest is in those whose form is '*A is B*'. There are still a number of possible logical forms, for, in the first place, the 'is' may be the 'is' of predication or the 'is' of identity, and in the second place, both '*A*' and '*B*' may be either common nouns, proper nouns, or singular terms. Here are two random examples.

Yale men are poor little lambs.

Cole Porter is a poor little lamb.

The kind of metaphor I hope to exploit is the one whose subject term is a proper name or singular term, specifically either the name of a person or a singular pronoun. When the 'is' is of identity, then the form may be 'I am *N*' where '*N*' is a singular term, proper name, or definite description, something referring to a specific person. When the 'is' is of predication, the form will be 'I am a *G*', where '*G*' is a general term.

This bothersome, quasi-technical terminology can be dropped once it is clear that what I am trying to describe is what is at the center of one's thought when one imagines being someone or something other than who or what one is. It is what comes to mind when I ask,

What if I were Robert Pinsky?

What if I were a Christian?

What if I were a lover of Wagner's music?

What comes to mind, I think, are thoughts expressed in these sentences:

I am Robert Pinsky.

I am a Christian.

I am a Wagner lover.

and I construe all these sentences to be metaphors. I suppose this is a dubious construal, and many students of metaphor will find these sentences alien to their sense of metaphor. I concede that this is a novel construal, but I ask indulgence because what

one must do to grasp any of these sentences is to think of one thing as something it plainly is not, and that, I think, is exactly what one must do to grasp a metaphor. Then even if it is inapt to call these sentences metaphors, the knack for grasping them is the same as the knack for grasping metaphors, and so I will call them metaphors of personal identification, and I will call the ability to grasp them the talent for metaphor.

In a metaphor of personal identification, usually, a person is said to be either another person or a person of a different kind, as in, for instance,

Juliet is the sun.  
The Lord is my shepherd.  
The poor are the Negroes of Europe.

I will be concentrating on cases in which the person is oneself, paying most attention to the identification of oneself with another person, cases of the form ‘I am *N*’ where ‘*N*’ is a singular term referring to a person. It will do to write such a case as

$I = N, <$

but doing so signals the need for a qualification. The ‘=’ indicating the ‘is’ of identity, when used in a metaphor, is not exactly the usual relation of identity. Standard identity is a symmetric relation. Thus,  $X = Y$  if and only if  $Y = X$ . The reason why this is not true of metaphorical identifications is this: to grasp a metaphor is to see one thing as another, and it is not, in general, the same to see  $X$  as  $Y$ , as it is to see  $Y$  as  $X$ .

In understanding this it may help to ponder a short story.

A Jewish man named ‘Lev’, living in eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century, one day says to some friends, “If I were the Czar, I would be richer than the Czar.”

“How could that be?” asks his friend. “If you were the Czar, you would have all the Czar’s wealth, and so you would be exactly as rich as the Czar. How could you be richer?”

“Well,” says Lev, “if I were the Czar, on the side I would give Hebrew lessons.”

What’s wrong with this? Is anything wrong with it?



Well, for a start, the Czar wouldn't give Hebrew lessons because, in the first place, it's just not something the Czar would do, and, secondly, it's not something the Czar could do, because, of course, the Czar doesn't know the language. But of course Lev knows Hebrew, and in fact right now he does make a little money giving Hebrew lessons.

So, would you say that if the Czar were Lev, he would be even richer? Does that seem different from asking, what if Lev were the Czar?

Do you feel like saying either of these?

If Lev were the Czar, he wouldn't know Hebrew.

If the Czar were Lev, he would know Hebrew.

My topic is the phenomenon of understanding one another, and, as noted earlier, it may seem dubious to connect this topic with the topic of metaphor. I do not know to what length the comparison can be kept salient, but I make the comparison, provisionally but also polemically, for this reason: the creation, expression, and comprehension of metaphors must involve speaking and thinking of one thing as another. I am persuaded that understanding one another involves thinking of oneself as another, and thus the talent for doing this must be related to the talent for thinking of one thing as another; and it may be the same talent, differently deployed. Thus I have tried taking sentences like 'Lev is the Czar', 'The Czar is Lev', and 'I am Lev' as metaphors. I will continue to do that.

Treating these "personal identifications" as metaphors may well seem unusual, and even suspect, and so, perhaps, will my very broad conception of metaphor. I am using the term to cover an array of forms, in all of which one thing is regarded as something that it is not. This sense comprehends metaphors in the usual, narrow sense, as well as figurative similes, analogies, allegories, and possibly even what might more commonly be regarded as parables.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> As extravagant as this idea may seem, I am not alone in entertaining it. In his essay "Midrash and Allegory," Gerald L. Bruns notes that "the logic of allegory is the same as in metaphor as regards the truth of statements or propo-

In a metaphor *A* is said to be *B*, in a simile *A* is said to be like *B*, in an analogy *A* is said to stand to *C* as *B* stands to *D* (and in some cases *C* and *D* are the same, as in “God is to me as my father is to me,” and there may be cases in which *A* and *B* are the same), while in allegory, typically, only *B* is mentioned and it is left to the reader to understand that *B* stands for, or represents, or “allegorizes” *A*. For examples we can consider, respectively, “Juliet is the sun,” “My love is like a red, red rose,” “Juliet stands to other women as the sun to the moon,” and, for an allegory of sorts, those lines in the *Song of Songs* in which a man and a woman make physical love when those lines are reunderstood either, as with Christians, to stand for the relation of Jesus to the Church, or, as with Jews, to stand for the relation of God to the people of Israel.

In every case, so I think, the figure is grounded in the idea that *A* can be understood (or “seen”) as *B*, and in virtually every interesting case this will be not because *A* and *B* share some property but because *B* has some property that *A* can be thought of as having, or imagined to have, when in fact the property is not literally a property of *A*.

During a reading he gave in Chicago when he was the honoree at Poetry Day 2006, Robert Hass said, “Someone had proposed to me that I should write a sequence of poems that were in succession simile, metaphor, and allegory.” He then read this:

THREE DAWN SONGS IN SUMMER<sup>8</sup>

I.

The first long shadows in the fields  
Are like mortal difficulty.  
The first birdsong is not like that at all.

sitions” (Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, editors, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987]).

<sup>8</sup> The poem is printed in Hass’s collection *Time and Materials* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2007).

2.

The light in summer is very young and wholly  
unsupervised.  
No one has made it sit down to breakfast.  
It's the first one up, the first one out.

3.

Because he has opened his eyes, he must be light  
And she, sleeping beside him, must be the visible,  
One ringlet of hair curled about her ear.  
Into which he whispers, "Wake up!"  
"Wake up!" he whispers.

What happens when one person is (metaphorically) identified with another is especially well illustrated when the biblical David is entangled in such an identification, but before turning to that story I will take up a more mundane example in order to make clear why metaphorical identity is not symmetrical, and is therefore not literal identity, and also to illustrate the ubiquity of metaphors of human understanding in even the most pedestrian exchanges.