Poet B comes to the edge of a daffodil galaxy.
Her son, Ben, shows them starry in his face.
His friend John is littler,
his face still closer
to the poignant & temporal blossoming.
He touches one. It nods. He nods.
The Sweet Williams are nodding.
She watches & keeps & speaks to
boys & the many of daffodils.
Such abundance, like her own abundance,
nods & gives liberty, herself responsible.

Ghosts of the thing-minded sigh wishing
they'd spent their time like her, wisely.

Yet their elegance minds us.
I lunch in their gameroom.
It reflects waters where catboats skim yachtless
behind heads of poets crowned
by the beams of spirits envious enough
of the work we do to allow us ketchup on
our choice of hand-held sandwiches
& recourse to coffee all afternoon.

o jazz generation
you're coming back
as ancestors, mamas & papas
rich in spooked conscience;
welcome; it's twilight;
all wander, ethereal; your roof overshadows
your mansion, many & occupied;
the osprey have nested close by & mated
this time successfully maybe;
poems, pocketed, electric, crackle
no louder than your whispering money;
& each of our houses has its own power house
housing a generator; each has, under ground,
its own house reservoir, glimmering.

MARIE PONSOT

10

Metaphor and the Order of Things

PAUL KAMEEN
University of Pittsburgh

> Discussions of metaphor—there are not many of them—often strike us as superficial. Not until we ourselves have made the attempt to get further do we begin to realize that the investigation of metaphor is curiously like the investigation of any of the primary data of consciousness: it cannot be pursued very far without our being led to the borderline of sanity. . . . The earth trembles and yawns beneath the explorer's feet.
>
> John Middleton Murry, "Metaphor"

> I have glanced for a moment at these deep waters into which a serious study of metaphor may plunge us, because possibly fear of them may be one cause why the study has so often not been enterprising and why Rhetoric traditionally has limited its inquiry to relatively superficial problems.
>
> I. A. Richards, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*

It is not so much the apocalyptic flash of these passages—the trembling earth, the deep waters, the plunging and pursuing—that attracts our attention these days. We have, after all, what with the latest critical sophistications, become connoisseurs of catastrophe. No, it is more the earnest, almost paranoiac, urgency, and the genuine uncertainty with which the risks of the enterprise in question are being measured. What

stakes could be so high, what losses so threatening, to inspire such fear and trembling? Especially in discussions of metaphor, which hadn't, among rhetoricians and literary critics at least, amounted to much of a walk on the wild side for a very long time, maybe even since Socrates put a lid on things by deciding to kick the poets out of his Republic. I will be coming around to this issue of the stakes, the potential losses, as the essay goes on; but I want to begin with the problem of superficiality, which from both of these writers' points of view has afflicted prior investigations into the subject, and which both of them seem hopeful of rising above.

Unfortunately, it is not all that simple. In Murry's case, for example, it is not merely, given his critical system, some "gap" in a "text" that threatens him as a "reader"; it is the earth itself, about to open up and swallow him wholly. One can understand, and even forgive, his failure of courage when, in the face of such a fate he beats a hasty and complete retreat from the heady prospect he had momentarily assumed, choosing instead to search over steadier and more familiar ground for what he calls a "middle way." His discussion of metaphor is thereby doomed to the same superficiality he admonishes in his predecessors. Richards is more explicit about what looms in the watery depths he stops for a moment to fathom. He is willing to entertain the possibility that not only might "the mind and all its doings" be "fictions," but likewise for "matter and all its adventures" (91). These are extraordinary claims for Richards to be thinking about making in 1936, guaranteed, it would seem, to get his discussion of metaphor off the dime of superficiality. As the essay proceeds, however, Richards takes a step back here, a stroke back there, until, by the end, his is more a brisk dip in the shallows than a plunge into deep waters. But he does at least, unlike Murry, get the discussion off the ground.

No matter, though, the degree to which, by our standards, Richards and Murry fall captive to the very vice they bridle against, the question remains: Just what about prior (and perhaps subsequent) discussions of metaphor has been so "superficial"? This essay is no place for a point-by-point survey of all of those discussions, but a map of their general structure is not that difficult to sketch. For there are two primary categories into which most traditional approaches to metaphor fall. The first defines metaphor as an act of renaming one thing in terms of another; it is therefore a sort of conveyance for transferring meaning from a familiar place—the "thing" to which it properly belongs—to a strange place—something, almost anything, else. The second defines metaphor as a agency for reconstituting one thing in terms of another; it is therefore a medium for synthesizing new meanings from old materials.

Our most commonplace ways of thinking about metaphor fall, of course, into the first category, and they are largely derivative from 18th- and 19th-century rhetorics, which are themselves little more than repetitive appendices to Aristotle, in this case to his definition of metaphor as "the transfer of a word belonging to something else" (*Poetics* 39). In Aristotle's system the context within which metaphor takes on its identity then is a mimetic theory of language. "For words," he says, "represent [imitate] things" (*Rhetoric* 184); and "one word may come closer than another to the thing described, may be more like it, and being more akin to it, may set it more distinctly before our eyes" (*Rhetoric* 184, 189). Though the qualifier "may" seems to leave in doubt the degree to which a word can actually and always maintain a one-to-one correspondence with its proper "thing," the mimetic theory certainly presumes, as the ground for discourse, such a primary and univocal linkage, and, further, that the world of "things," of non-words, exists prior to, independent of and uncontaminated by the linguistic instruments we deploy to mimic it. Metaphor is, in the context of such a system, necessarily an impertinence, a purposeful mis-naming of the thing, the effect of which is to add an air of dignity (*Poetics* 41–42) or a dash of novelty (*Rhetoric* 186) to the otherwise competent but drab canvas of literal discourse.

For Aristotle, metaphor is in fact merely a subset of "lexis"—diction or style—the final step in the production of discourse, the means by which meanings are made to "appear" in actual language. Its proper function has then, by fiat, been radically circumscribed: to redeem the diction arising from "authorative" words—normal, referential language—from "abjectness," i.e., to make "idiomatic" discourse less boring (*Poetics* 41–42). As long as the potentially subversive power of metaphor—its capacity to estrange the word from its proper thing—is held so strictly in check (in this case by making it the last rather than the first thing one does with language) there is not much of a problem. Any discussions, of course, on the subject are likely to be pretty formulaic, pretty brief, pretty superficial, as in fact they were, at least among rhetoricians, for a couple of thousand years after Aristotle.

In our own century, Max Black has labeled the structure (impertinence for the purpose of ornamentation) as the "substitution view" of metaphor, according to which "the focus of a metaphor, the word or expression having a distinctly metaphorical use within a literal frame, is used to communicate a meaning that might have been expressed literally" (32).

This view, as Black points out, assumed enough authority to serve as the prototype not only for almost every definition of metaphor in our rhetoric textbooks, but also even as the framework for the only definition of metaphor provided in the *OED*: "The figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable." Here we have in capsule form all of the essential elements of the substitution view of metaphor: the notion of a meaning being "transferred" from its customary place to a new and strange place, of objects as discrete and "different from" one another, a spatial isolation that can be transfigured by the artifice of analogy, and finally of "names and descriptive terms" as "properly applicable" in one place by some unspecified but clearly metaphysical necessity—and presumably improperly applicable, impertinent, elsewhere. Thus metaphor remains, as it was for Aristotle, a small sub-set of language, the study of which is confined to the linguistic analysis of the odd disjunction between the literal and semantic aspects of such expressions. In Wayne Booth's terms, metaphor remains a "deliberate rhetorical deviation" from "normal discourse," a kind of verbal aberration that packs its meanings elsewhere than on the surface and doubly mediates between what is said and what is meant (52).

The extent to which this view has informed and constrained the way we talk about metaphor is suggested when even Owen Barfield, whose conception of metaphor is generally quite rich, can lapse into the habit of claiming that metaphor involves "saying one thing in terms of another" (111). Even Max Black, who criticizes this sort of semantic polarization, advances only slightly beyond it in his own "interaction view" of metaphor, which simply enlivens the interplay between the two planes of the metaphor by complicating the processes by which the subsidiary and primary "foci" interact in their contextual "frames" to produce a semantic overflow. Such bi-focal conceptions of the functional structure of metaphor do, of course, provide it with some potential as an epistemological agent. When what is meant is compelled to lurk in the shade of what is said, the very act of comprehension must require a "way of knowing" first of all that what is said is not what is meant, and second of all for construing what is meant despite the fact that it is not what is said. In effect, "reading" a metaphor involves recognizing and approving of the "creativity" of such an intentional mistake. Discussions of how and why such interpretive activity should take place can range from the very simple—along the information-processing model, for example—to the very complicated—along the lines of literary criticism, for example. But they are unlikely to rise ever, as long as this structure remains intact, above the

charge of superficiality that Richards and Murry so astutely accuse them of.

The principal alternative to this view of metaphor has arisen more recently, in a variety of guises, two of which are of specific interest to me here: the proto-new-critical definition proposed by Richards himself and the phenomenological definition offered by Paul Ricoeur. What these two systems, so obviously different as they might otherwise be, share in common is the assertion that metaphor, as Richards would have it, is not merely "a grace or ornament or *added* power of language, but rather its constitutive form" (90). His first gesture in fulfilling this promise is to redefine metaphor as a mental rather than a lexical or linguistic function:

> The traditional theory noticed only a few of the modes of metaphor; and it limited its application of the term *metaphor* to a few of them only. And thereby it made metaphor seem to be a verbal matter, a shifting and displacement of words, whereas fundamentally it is a borrowing between and intercourse of *thoughts*, a transaction between contexts. *Thought* is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom. (94)

This does functionally transform metaphor from the stage hand of invention—moving words from here to there to enhance an effect—into, at least, the leading actor, giving voice to what meanings we can make. As to the making of those meanings, though, that capacity appears to reside elsewhere, in "thought" for example, which seems here, as elsewhere in Richards, much as he keeps trying to avoid it, to pre-figure the language, figurative or otherwise, with which it is ultimately represented.

In the same vein, Richards argues that "a word is normally a substitute for (or means) not one discrete past impression, but a combination of general aspects." Thus, "in the simplest formulations, when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction" (93). Once again it is metaphor that is the product of, not the maker of, the "interaction" of these "two thoughts of different things." And we now have an added layer of not-language in the equation: those "things" which there are "thoughts of" resulting, by their interaction, in a "meaning."

The problems continue to mount in Richards' effort to distinguish between the "two ideas that any metaphor, at its simplest, gives us" (96). He calls these the "tenor and the vehicle," a tandem that does in fact allow him to do considerably more with his analysis of the potential range of metaphor than his predecessors (100, 118). But still there intrudes this

problematic dissociation of the linguistic aspect of metaphor—the figure itself—from that to which it refers, or perhaps more appropriately defers: "The tenor," for example, becomes "the underlying idea or principal subject which the vehicle or figure means" (97). Where before it was the thoughts of things which the whole of a metaphor enacted, it is now the "idea" or "subject" which intervenes, under the mask of the tenor, between the figure and its ultimate meaning. It would seem that what is gradually being recuperated is a stable, non-verbal realm to which language refers, i.e., the concept of representation, and, with it, the bifurcation of language itself into two modes: the literal, which keeps close ties to this extrinsic reality, and the figurative, which doesn't.

Richards presumes just such a bifurcation when he argues:

> Whether, therefore, a word is being used literally or metaphorically is not always, or indeed as a rule, an easy matter to settle. We may provisionally settle it by deciding whether, in a given instance, the word gives us two ideas or one. . . . If we cannot distinguish tenor from vehicle then we may provisionally take the word to be literal; if we can distinguish at least two co-operating uses, then we have metaphor. (119)

Richards goes on to suggest that "by this test, of course, most sentences in free or fluid discourse turn out to be metaphoric. Literal language is rare outside the central parts of the sciences" (120). This does, obviously, attribute to metaphor a great deal more frequency and authority than does the "substitution view." On the other hand, we're still left with an irreducible core of literal language, belonging primarily to the sciences, which, small as it might be, remains the ground against which metaphoric language establishes, as figure, its identity. The nemesis that Richards seemed ready to face down when he imagined the intrinsic fictionality of what we call "mind" and "matter," gradually re-emerges over the course of these two lectures to take most of it back.

Richards makes a genuine effort at the close of his argument to reverse this trend of capitulation. "Words," he asserts, "are not a medium in which to copy life. Their true work is to restore life itself to order" (134). Once again, Richards tries to deny that language is primarily mimetic in its functions, that metaphor, consequently, is not solely ornamental. But what interests me most here is the reference to "order," a recurrent motif in this final lecture.

In Richards' system, it seems, psychological order, social order, political order, all reflect, he proposes, their microcosmic double in linguistic order:

> Thus in happy living the same patterns are exemplified and the same risks of error are avoided as in tactful and discerning reading. The general form of the interpretative process is the same, with a small-scale instance—the right understanding of a figure of speech—or with a large-scale instance—the conduct of a friendship. (136)

One must need, of course, a system of privilege within which such loaded terms as "error" and "right" can take on any particular meaning. And it looks like it falls to Rhetoric to provide that system:

> It seems modest and reasonable to . . . hope that a patient persistence with the problems of Rhetoric may, while exposing the causes and modes of the misinterpretation of words, also throw light upon and suggest a remedial discipline for deeper and more grievous disorders; that, as the small and local errors in our everyday misunderstandings with language are models in miniature of the greater errors which disturb the development of our personalities, their study may also show us more about how these large scale disasters may be avoided. (136–37)

The dissimulations and complications characteristic of metaphor are a big problem as long as "misinterpretation of words" pre-figures "grievous disorders," as long as "local errors" pre-figure "large scale disasters." Only the proper "remedial discipline" can hold such threats in abeyance, and metaphor, in Richards' system, seems to be held in check by its subordination to something, on the one hand, that is language but not-metaphor—literal discourse—and to something, on the other hand, that is metaphoric but is not-language—"thinking." To abandon such a base, such a ground, is to risk the very order Richards is interested, finally, in preserving here. That is what is at stake for Richards, as it was for Aristotle and most of the rhetoricians that came between. In that light, Murry may not be overstating things to suggest that even "sanity" is jeopardized whenever one is trying to draw the borders around metaphor—at least as long as one's concept of sanity presumes an extant reality that supersedes and outlasts the ephemera of language, figurative or otherwise. To allow metaphor to overrun its bounds is to threaten, then, the orderliness of discourse, which is, ultimately, to threaten the orderliness of the mind, of society. One can see why Richards, no matter his courage, must resist his most extreme temptation: to define both mind and matter as fictions, originating rather than culminating in language.

Forty years later Paul Ricoeur seeks to pick up this conversation where, in his view, Richards left it off:

> My thesis is that it is not only for theories which deny metaphors any informative value and any truth claim that images and feelings have a *constitutive* function. I want instead to show that the kind of theory of metaphor initiated by I. A. Richards in *Philosophy of Rhetoric* . . . cannot achieve its own goal without including imagining and feeling, that is, without assigning a *semantic* function to what seems to be mere *psychological* features and without, therefore, concerning itself with some accompanying factors extrinsic to the informative kernel of metaphor. (141–42)

Ricoeur's ambition is to assess "the semantic role of imagination and eventually feeling" in the "work of resemblance" (143), to locate the "constitutive function" of metaphor in a context different from, and presumably more powerful than, the one Richards chooses. But it seems hardly likely, even at this early moment in his essay, that Ricoeur can achieve the "goal" that Richards falls short of. For despite the obvious differences in their philosophical agendas—Richards is heir to the Anglo-American pragmatists and semiologists, Ricoeur to the European phenomenologists and existentialists—we can begin to see already a structural resemblance in their epistemic systems. Whereas for Richards it is (usually) "thinking," for Ricoeur it is (usually) "feeling" that prefigures and supercedes the production of metaphoric discourse. For both then it is in factors "extrinsic," rather than intrinsic, to language that meaning-making originates.

Ricoeur does, though, make some headway against one of the long-standing inhibitions to the investigation of metaphor: the stigma of impertinence:

> . . . it seems to me that we are still only halfway to a full understanding of the semantic innovation which characterizes metaphorical phrases or sentences if we underline only the aspect of deviance in metaphor. . . . The decisive feature is the semantic innovation, thanks to which a new pertinence, a new congruence, is established in such a way that the utterance "makes sense" as a whole. . . . In other words, metaphorical meaning does not merely consist of a semantic clash but of the *new* predicative meaning which emerges from the collapse of the literal meaning, that is, from the collapse of the meaning which obtains if we rely only on the common or usual lexical values of our words. (144)

This is not much different from what Richards seems to want to argue on behalf of the originary power of metaphor, though Ricoeur's mode of discourse allows him to get it out more slickly. But still, at the center of things, is this hobgoblin of the "literal," which seems in this case, as it was for Richards, the unchallenged base against which metaphor must run counter to generate its "new pertinence." Conflicts between the literal and the metaphoric erupt in fact throughout the essay, with the former retaining consistently its hierarchical priority in relation to the latter, a structure that is established in Ricoeur's opening paragraph, where he defines the concept of "semantic theory," so crucial to his argument, as "an inquiry into the capacity of metaphor to provide untranslatable information and, accordingly, into metaphor's claim to yield some true insight about reality" (141). As long as metaphor's highest ambition is to earn the right to be "about reality," as long as it has to argue on behalf of its claim to "yield some true insight," as long, that is, as it takes on its identity by contrast with the more reputable and prudent modes of literal discourse, it may achieve the status of "pertinence" that Ricoeur countenances for it, but it will never, any more than it did for Aristotle, escape the stigma of "deviance," "acceptable" or otherwise.

Ricoeur goes on to do a lot of complicated things with "proportionalities" and "ratios," which are in fact somewhat more sophisticated versions of the traditional bi-focal systems for describing the operations of metaphor. And his notions of the "split reference" and "*epoché*" likewise allow him to do and claim certain things that elude his predecessors, including Richards. But in the final analysis Ricoeur's treatment is afflicted by the same strictures that have dogged discussions of metaphor from the start: Metaphor remains a subset of lexis, aberrant in its essential structural relationship with "normal" discourse, requiring, therefore, a complicated set of strategies both for its invention and its interpretation.

Like Richards, Ricoeur flirts with a concept of "fiction" as the locus for his ultimate argument on behalf of the originary powers of metaphor:

> It is to . . . the image as fiction that is attached the power of symbolic systems to "remake" reality. . . . But this productive and projective function of fiction can only be acknowledged if one sharply distinguishes it from the reproductive role of the so-called mental image which merely provides us with a re-presentation of things already perceived. *Fiction* addresses itself to deeply rooted potentialities of reality to the extent that they are absent from the actualities with which we deal in everyday life under the mode of empirical control and manipulation. (152–53)

We have here another re-enactment of the scene in which figurative language has always found itself: bragging about its superiority to the language of "everyday life" while at the same time boxing itself into a position from which it must plead feverishly for some concessions to its

claims to be "about" the same "reality" it is feigning contempt for. This structure is reinforced when Ricoeur turns to the concept of poetry, the epitome, it seems, for him, of figurative/fictional discourse. As he explains:

> poetic language is no less *about* reality than any other use of language but refers to it by means of a complex strategy which implies, as an essential component, a suspension and seemingly an abolition of the ordinary reference attached to descriptive language. (151)

We have here the customary plea to admit poetry into the realm of discourse that is "about reality," followed by the equally familiar excuse that it only seems not to belong there because it is more "complex" in its strategies, must accomplish its goals by means of "suspension" and "abolition," which are not, it seems to me, much different from the sorts of things—like subterfuge and dissimulation—that poetry is often faulted rather than applauded for. The inevitable consequence of such a stance is to define "poetry" (and in Ricoeur's system both "fiction" and "metaphor") in terms of and by contrast with some other primary mode of discourse, one that deploys language descriptively or referentially and which is therefore more obviously and legitimately "about reality." The only role that metaphor can play in such a context is deviant and, finally, ornamental, which is where this all started in the first place. No wonder then that while discussions of metaphor have gotten more and more specialized, more and more complicated, denser and less accessible, they have remained equally "superficial."

Ricoeur's reasons for ending up in such a defensive posture are, I think, not unlike Richards': There is an "order" at stake, one he is committed to and would prefer not to put at risk. While for Richards—as one would expect given the impetus of his leading concept, thinking—it is the mental health, the sanity, if you will, of both the individual and of society that is at stake; for Ricoeur it is the emotional health of both the individual and of culture.

> To *feel*, in an emotional sense of the word, is to make *ours* what has been put at a distance by thought in its objectifying phase.
>
> . . . Feeling is not contrary to thought. It is thought made ours. This felt participation is a part of its complete meaning as poem. (154)

It seems to be via this notion of meaning-as-poem that the potentially destructive possibilities of *epoché* are overcome, that unity is restored, that our feelings are " 'attuned to' aspects of reality which cannot be expressed in terms of the objects referred to in ordinary language" (156). Thus, it is by a kind of transcendence that emotional order is restored, that cultural

order is maintained. The very elitism of poetry that Ricoeur could be said at the outset to be trying to overcome has now, at the close here, been reinstated, crucial to the "order" he hopes to preserve.

We see a clue to the primary threat to that order in his earlier discussion of the concept of *epoché*:

> Imagination *is epoché*. As Sartre emphasized, to imagine is to address oneself to what is not. More radically, to imagine is to make oneself absent to the whole of things. Yet I do not want to elaborate further on this thesis of the negativity proper to the image. (152)

The demon of "negativity," of "absence," then is something Ricoeur hopes to elude, or at least elide, if only by refusing to talk about it. This concept, which deconstructionist systems have seized upon to overcome many of the inhibitions that seem here to silence Ricoeur, may in fact be his own "borderline of sanity," the line he'd just as soon not have to cross. For to do so would be to violate the traditional hierarchical relationship between poetic and representational discourses, a structure that is even more endemic to Ricoeur's argument than it was to Richards'. And it would probably mean admitting that there is no clear line that can be drawn between what is metaphor and what is not in any mode of discourse. To preserve the order of his system against the ambitions of absence, Ricoeur must ask awkward questions and generate convoluted answers in explaining how and why metaphor works. And that has been, it seems to me, the unfortunate fate of all our efforts at non-superficial discussions of metaphor.

But why not simply invert that hierarchy and install figurative discourse as the ground against which referential modes of discourse, and the "literal" "reality" they have, historically, engendered, figure problematically. This is, in one sense, what Richards was tempted toward by his vision of ubiquitous fiction; and it might be what Ricoeur senses in Sartrean negativity. But the cost, the penalty, for such gestures is just too steep for them: "reality," "thinking," "feeling," even "things," all become products of, rather than antecedents for, figurative discourse, for, i.e., all discourse. Language then, like Middleton Murry's explorer, has no longer any solid ground to stand on, no "sanity" to measure its madnesses against. Deconstructionist systems have, of course, already taken us this far, and further. But what even they can't seem to shake are the strains of elitism that seem always to show all over our definitions of "poetry," "literature," "fictions." Simply to make *all* texts potentially literary, to make the process of "reading" "texts" universally complicated, to institutionalize the role of "teacher" or "critic" or, most generally, "expert"

in all interpretive transactions, is not really much of an answer. But how to do the opposite is surely, at this stage of our longstanding cultural conversation about the proper role and status of figurative discourse, not an easy matter to imagine. I am thinking now, for example, about a conversation that begins by presuming the "everydayness" of fiction, the unproblematic givenness of "metaphor," the simplicity and straightforwardness of "poetry," that treats in fact literature not as a problem for subtle analysis and critical circumspection, but as what we as humans most naturally make and do. I am thinking about a conversation in which we might be saying how odd and tremendously exciting it is that we have, as a civilization, invented, almost perfected, an array of linguistic instruments and discourses, from "everyday" idioms to sophisticated scientific jargons and methods, to domesticate the various "realities" we have found it necessary and useful to constitute. I am thinking about a conversation in which we would have none of the dense and long-winded "defenses" of poetry we have become accustomed to, the ones that elevate the status of poetry to the realm of exotic, precious uselessness; a conversation that would more likely involve explanations and defenses of the "literal," the univocal, the referential; I am thinking about a conversation that would not acknowledge the customary distinction between rhetoric and poetics, the bifurcation of "composition" and "literature," to say nothing of "creative" writing, that would not isolate writing from reading, that would not even have us in charge of the "reading" of our "culture," responsible for the cultivation of reading.

There seems to me no better place, no more appropriate occasion, to imagine this new discussion, this escape from the superficial, than a celebration of the contributions made already on its behalf by Ann Berthoff.

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