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Implied Metaphor: A Problem in Evaluating Contemporary Poetry

Alberta T. Turner

One of the criteria which a reader has long been able to use more or less objectively in evaluating a poem is that of effective metaphor. He has been able to establish the tenor,¹ and having established it, has then been able to say whether the vehicle used to explain it is too trite to be interesting or too grotesque to be believed, whether it creates a suitable tone, whether it is contradictory or obscure or mixed. But many contemporary poets, while still using metaphor in its usual ways, have also extended its form so that it is at one extreme almost indistinguishable from literal description or narrative (a vehicle without a tenor) and at the other extreme almost indistinguishable from mere randomness or nonsense (neither tenor nor vehicle). As a result, editors, critics, reviewers and readers often hesitate, vacillate and finally disagree about the success or failure of a contemporary poem.

A comparison of two poems by Philip Hey² illustrates what I mean by the first kind of implied metaphor, that in which the tenor is implied. "Painting the Barn"³ is quite literally a man's thoughts about painting a barn while painting a barn. I detect nothing in it which leads me to believe that the barn or the painter or the action "stand for" something else:

PAINTING THE BARN

a pretty long time
years maybe since he
did it last time still
it doesn't leak the
walls are good thought
I might do it in white
this time but no the red
is cheaper five gallons
at a time then walks
swaying with the ladder his

¹ *Tenor* and *vehicle*: I. A. Richards' terms for the two halves of a metaphor. *Tenor* is the concept (usually abstract) to be explained; *vehicle* is the concrete, basically unlike, equivalent, some quality of which corresponds to the same quality in the tenor, as *life* is a *bowl of cherries*, both of which possess qualities of bitterness and sweetness.

² All poems analyzed in this paper are from *Field: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* (Oberlin, Ohio, 1970-), of which I am one of four editors, or from the files of poems submitted to *Field*. I have deliberately chosen the most simple, clear examples in order to isolate the kinds of metaphor I am trying to explain.

³ *Field*, no. 2 (Spring, 1970), p. 39.

son on the other end, pokes
it at the sky the feet
on the ground good thing
I put down that straw it
dried out the ground pretty
good and thinks well
maybe I should have used
the white after all but
too late now climbs
up swings up the bucket
maybe the fence too later
and covers up CHEW RED MAN

But compare "It is 6 A.M. in the Middle of Kansas And,"⁴ by the same author:

IT IS 6 A.M. IN THE MIDDLE OF KANSAS AND

the man wants fried eggs
over hard and bacon and
potatoes and coffee he
is big shouldered he
doesn't see anything
he just eats and drinks and
scrapes his egg around with
old toast and puts it in
his mouth and chews it up
he is not a dream of America
his food is not a dream
of America he gets up and
thumps his check and his
wallet there is money
inside he leaves
a thumbprint on his
glass and the coffee
is half gone and cold
and the egg is all gone
and warm in his belly
it is probably quarter
to seven in Kansas.

Literally this poem describes a man eating breakfast at a diner in the middle of Kansas and nothing more. Hey tells us that "he is not a dream of America/ his food is not a dream/ of America. . . ." But the very denial is a clue that a dream

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

of America is involved—a conventional dream rejected. The very fact of its rejection starts the reader agreeing or objecting or revising that dream of America. If the poet had meant to keep the metaphor of the American dream out of the poem, he need only have let the man eat his eggs without comment, but by denying the metaphor of the dream, he has implied it.

A second example of this kind of implied metaphor is Richard Sommer's "The First Planet After Her Death":⁵

THE FIRST PLANET AFTER HER DEATH

A dog lopes across a meadow
taking a lot of time to get there,
wherever it thinks it is going.
It is not going anywhere, this dog

(watching it from a great way
to one side, one side of what?
one side of the field, watching
its hind legs coming down each time
a little to the left of the front,
tracking a little to one side)

this dog taking a very long time
to make it over, the whole field,
sometimes loping through grass
almost tall enough to hide him

then being gone from the field,
the sun going down, the stars
crossing overhead and being gone
in turn, crossing the grass field.

The poem describes in literally accurate detail a dog loping across a field and disappearing, then the sun and then the stars. There is nothing in the poem which *must* be taken as metaphor in order to be understood. Even the title can be read as literally true. It could be literally the first time that the poet looked at the planet Earth after the death of someone close to him. Still, it is an unusual title. Sommer could so easily have called it "The First Summer After Her Death" or "The First Walk in the Fields Without Her." The title suggests at least that the poem is going to say something about the cosmic properties of death, make a metaphor for some metaphysical abstraction. This suspicion is supported by the order of the events described in the poem: day disappears, then sun, then stars. At this point certain apparently random remarks about the dog assume additional meaning. The fact that the direction of its hind legs is at slight variance with that of its front legs; the fact that it thinks it's going somewhere but is not; the

⁵ *Field*, no. 4 (Spring, 1971), p. 45.

fact, repeated, that it takes a long time to cross the field; the fact that the grass sometimes hides it; the repetition of *gone* for the dog's and the stars' disappearance and the repetition of *across*, *crossing* and *crossing* for dog, sun and stars. The viewer's watching from a distance and off to one side implies in this context a cosmic detachment necessary to conceive of death as a metaphysical abstraction rather than a unique personal loss. The dog's journey across the field has become that familiar allegory, the journey of life, but because it is first a real journey such as a real dog might make any day, anywhere, and because only the title and the sequence suggest that the reader look further for its meaning, the work of providing that meaning has been almost entirely the reader's. If he is not alert, he may even miss the allegory or, worse yet, overallegorize. He may see metaphysical significance in the fact that the dog lopes instead of galloping or using several different gaits, in the fact that the hind legs fall to the left instead of the right, or in identifying grass with a specific event or kind of event in human life.

When literal scene or narrative seems to lack significance if taken literally, yet also lacks a clearly implied tenor which will allow it to be taken metaphorically, critics and editors can only infer that the poem has failed. For example,

THE MENTOR BOOK OF MAJOR BRITISH POETS⁶

The Mentor Book of Major British Poets,
 a paperback edited by Oscar Williams,
 is a compact anthology of two centuries
 of poetry by 23 great British poets
 from Blake and Wordsworth to
 Robert Browning and Dylan Thomas
 reposing in 114B in the back building
 of the Center for Advanced Studies
 at the University of Illinois in Urbana,
 an old, dusty white bathroom,
 on top of the toilet tank
 beside a roll of toilet paper,
 standing on end,
 and a stack of brown paper towels.

This poem describes literally a common situation, mildly ironic: Poems, towels and toilet paper are stacked together on the toilet tank, an observation not especially fresh, surprising nor complex. A reader familiar with contemporary poetry next looks for an underlying metaphor. But there is no clue of order, selection of detail, literary allusion, title or other rhetorical device which would suggest that the scene is more than a concrete example of the way in which physical needs dominate aesthetic needs. The poet has not made the whole scene *stand for* the American aesthetic in the way that Hey made the man eating eggs in the Kansas

⁶ By James Klein, submitted to *Field*; used by permission of the author.

diner *stand for* the American dream. He has not implied a tenor. Why, then, did "Painting the Barn" succeed even though it too implied no tenor and described a scene quite as common as this one? Because its function is fully performed without metaphor. It recreates both the need to cleanse and the need to choose, which are psychologically inherent in every reader, and it recreates them in the reader's own senses. It demonstrates no intellectual abstraction which needs to be translated into sensory perception in order to be fully understood, no cliché which has lost its real referent. The American dream and the journey of life are such clichés, and Hey and Sommer have used metaphor to make the reader re-apprehend them. The American aesthetic is also such a cliché, but Klein does not seem to have used metaphor to help the reader re-apprehend it.

The same problems and rewards of suspecting and identifying implied metaphor operate in poems which juxtapose absurdities and impossibilities until the reader cannot put them together in any way *except* metaphorically. In Russell Edson's poem "One Wonders,"⁷ one does indeed wonder whether the poem is a deliberate spoof, mocking the overzealous metaphor-hunter, or a poem with a serious implication under its light, mocking tone:

ONE WONDERS

A woman had put on apron. But put it on too high,
and tied it around her neck, so that she is choking.

She had come into the kitchen to cook the dog's dinner.
She had descended the stairs and walked into the kitchen.

She had been upstairs when she saw the sun wounded,
bleeding in the West; and said, it is the dog's dinner-time.

She had been asleep, and had awakened and looked into
a newspaper, because it is there that father sits looking. What
is it that father looks at?

But earlier she had gotten into bed because the dog had
bitten her.

Father had said, that dog will surely bite you; and he con-
tinued looking into his newspaper.

Then the dog bit her, and she went upstairs and got into
bed.

Then she looked into a newspaper to find out why the
dog had bitten her.

Now, unfortunately, she is on the kitchen floor being
choked by apron strings.

Father is looking at his newspaper.

She is on the kitchen floor.

The dog is hungry.

One wonders what will happen.

⁷ *Field*, no. 7 (Spring, 1973), p. 46.

A series of commonplace and routine domestic acts is exaggerated to absurdity and juxtaposed in a sequence so logical that it too becomes absurd. The chronology of events is that (1) a woman's father is reading the newspaper when he remarks to his daughter that the dog will bite her; (2) it then does bite her; (3) she goes upstairs to bed and to sleep; (4) she awakes and looks in the newspaper to see what her father had seen there that made him say the dog would bite her; (5) she notices that the sun is setting, and that reminds her that it is dog's dinner-time; (6) she descends the stairs to cook the dog's dinner; (7) she ties on an apron too high, around her neck (we are not told why); (8) now, apparently because she is choking, she is down on the floor, ignored or merely unobserved by the father, and still importuned by the hungry dog. "One wonders what will happen": something grotesque and unexpected? Her choking to death or getting out of the mess unaided? Or, since the poem is an artifact and we have reached its end, will nothing at all happen? On the surface this is an absurd sequence of events. One would know one's own dog better than to try to discover its habits from the paper; one would not merely go to bed and to sleep after being bitten by a dog; one would not tie an apron around one's neck by mistake, certainly not so tightly as to be choked by it; one's father would not sit reading the paper throughout the whole series of incidents. If it is merely an absurd narrative, the reader does not know whether to be mildly distressed (after all, it couldn't very well have happened, and certainly wouldn't happen to him), mildly amused (it isn't wild enough to startle or shock his fancy) or just bored. Read as metaphor, however, the narrative's absurdities make very good sense. They make literal the cliché "force of habit": no matter what he has done, the dog must get his dinner; no matter how it strangles, the apron must be tied on; and no matter that it tells neither the father nor daughter anything, the paper must be read. Even the sun, described as wounded and bleeding, in a travesty of one of the oldest and commonest of all metaphors, bleeds to death only as a signal to cook the dog's dinner. This context further enlarges *dog* to stand ironically in the place of all masters, from husbands to states; *apron* for all the choking paraphernalia of servitude; *father* for all the indifferent power of the universe; and *newspaper* for all the unguiding or falsely imagined oracles. The poem has not spelled out, not even insisted, that the reader consciously connect these metaphorical equivalents, but it has distorted probability enough to make the reader look for an underlying and different sort of coherence, and it has rewarded the reader's closer look with a metaphorical coherence which accounts for all the distortions of reality in the poem.

When the distortion of reality sets the reader on such a search and then fails to reward him with discovery of metaphorical coherence, he cannot just conclude, as he can with conventional metaphor, that the poet has intended to clarify a specific tenor by means of a specific vehicle and failed at a recognizable point for an identifiable reason. He can merely ask whether his sense of its failure is the result of his looking for metaphor where the poet intended none, or the result of the poet's inability to limit the possible associations of certain words to only those which will work in that particular metaphor, or to his own obtuseness

in not making associations which he could make and which the poet trusted him to make. In other words, if the poem fails, the reader will have to suspect, unless he analyzes it very carefully and more than once, that its failure is his own fault.

Take for example, "Apple Pie":⁸

APPLE PIE

The bear-bird sits on the windowsill, scratching
and growling that it won't fly away. The size
of a gull, it has blue eyes and bad breath, but
you have to look past it to see the parade.

The creature on the windowsill is part bear, part seagull. It is given physical characteristics (blue eyes, bad breath, a growling speech) and personality (discourteous, stubborn) which might be either animal or human. The human persona (*you*) apparently wants it to go away in order to see the parade, and the whole contretemps is entitled "Apple Pie." Obviously the scene cannot be literal. The reader next tries to abstract the qualities inherent in the actors and actions of the situation to see if they are psychologically coherent: (1) *Bear*: surly, dangerous, unmovable. Protective (Smokey the Bear)? *Scratching, growling* and *bad breath* preclude the second interpretation. (2) *Seagull*: beggar, scavenger. Aspirant (Jonathan Livingston Seagull)? The statement that it won't fly seems to preclude this interpretation. (3) *Parade*: triumph, advertising display, false ostentation. We are given no clue at all as to whether victory or vanity is to be emphasized. (4) *Apple Pie*: physical comfort, cliché for the American dream, example of oversimplification. At this point I almost see a connection—Smokey and Jonathan and apple pie and parades are all oversimplified comfort-creators which get in the way of seeing clearly—but the poet hasn't given me enough help to be sure. He has not stressed the comforting qualities of the bear-bird enough to be sure that Smokey and Jonathan are meant; for all he has told me of the parade, it might be the boardwalk of a British seaside resort. I cannot even be sure that these words are not the first that came into the poet's mind as he sat at his desk at lunch before an open window in a seaside town and glanced down at a magazine open at an advertisement for fire insurance. In other words, I have a hunch that the whole poem may be a metaphor, but I'm not sure. If it is, the author is not in control of it and thus of my reactions to it. If it is not a metaphor, it seems pointless and dull, for if presented only for its own sake, the bear-bird is neither a very funny nor a very threatening monster—as monsters go, and I don't know why I should want "to see the parade."

This is a fairly easy poem to reject. I chose to discuss it here only because it isolates a problem which in many other examples is complicated by too many other critical considerations to be handled in this space. But I believe that it and the sample poems by Hey, Sommer, Klein and Edson are typical enough to show that contemporary poets use a great deal of metaphor which must be inferred

⁸ By Ron Silliman, submitted to *Field*, used by permission of the author.

from either (a) the isolation and sequence of literal events and concrete details which are not meaningful and suggestive unless taken metaphorically, or (b) the juxtaposition of events and details which are distorted in some way so that they cannot be taken literally, but cohere only if they prove to be the vehicles for implied tenors. When these sorts of poems fail, they force the reader to doubt himself, at least at first, as much as he doubts the poet, and they help make criticism an anxiously subjective task.