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## METAPHOR AS MISTAKE

BY WALKER PERCY

**I**N Mississippi, the coin record players, which are manufactured by Seeburg, are commonly known to Negroes as seabirds.

During the Korean war, one way of saying that someone had been killed was to say that he had bought the farm.

I remember hunting as a boy in South Alabama with my father and brother and a Negro guide. At the edge of some woods we saw a wonderful bird. He flew as swift and straight as an arrow, then all of a sudden folded his wings and dropped like a stone into the woods. I asked what the bird was. The guide said it was a Blue Dollar Hawk. Later my father told me the Negroes had got it wrong: it was really a Blue Darter Hawk. I can still remember my disappointment at the correction. What was so impressive about the bird was its dazzling speed and the effect of alternation of its wings, as if it were flying by a kind of oaring motion.

As a small boy of six or seven walking the streets of Cambridge I used often to pass little dead-end streets, each with its signpost which at its top read, say, Trowbridge Place or Irving Terrace, and underneath in letters of a different color and on a separate board, the following mysterious legend: Private Way Dangerous Passing. The legend meant of course merely that the City of Cambridge, since it neither built nor maintained the roadbed of this place or this terrace, would not be responsible for injury to life or property sustained through its use. But to me it meant something else. It meant that there was in passing across its mouth a clear and present danger which might, and especially at dusk,

suddenly leap out and overcome me. Thus, to say the least of it, I had the regular experience of that heightened, that excited sense of being which we find in poetry, whenever I passed one of those signs.

R. P. Blackmur, in  
*Language as Gesture*

Misreadings of poetry, as every reader must have found, often give examples of this plausibility of the opposite term. I had at one time a great admiration for that line of Rupert Brooke's about

The keen  
Impassioned beauty of a great machine,  
a daring but successful image, it seemed to me, for that contrast between the appearance of effort and the appearance of certainty, between forces greater than human and control divine in its foreknowledge, which is what excites one about engines; they have the calm of *beauty* without its complacency, the strength of *passion* without its disorder. So it was a shock to me when I looked at one of the quotations of the line one is always seeing about, and found that the beauty was *unpassioned*, because machines, as all good nature poets know, have no hearts. I still think that a prosaic and intellectually shoddy adjective, but it is no doubt more intelligible than my emendation, and sketches the same group of feelings.

William Empson, in  
*Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Four of the five examples given above are mistakes: misnamings, misunderstandings, or misrememberings. But they are mistakes which, in each case, have resulted in an authentic poetic experience—what Blackmur calls “that heightened, that excited sense of being”—an experience, moreover, which was notably absent before the mistake was made. I have included the fifth, the Korean war expression “he bought the farm,” not because it is a mistake but because I had made a mistake in including it.

The expression had struck me as a most mysterious one, peculiarly potent in its laconic treatment of death as a business transaction. But then a kind Korean veteran told me that it may be laconic all right, but he didn't see anything mysterious about it: the farm the G. I. was talking about was six feet of ground. This is probably obvious enough, but I have preserved this example of my own density as instructive in what follows.

It might be useful to look into the workings of these accidental stumblings into poetic meaning, because they exhibit in a striking fashion that particular feature of metaphor which has most troubled philosophers: that it is "wrong"—it asserts of one thing that it is something else—and further, that its beauty often seems proportionate to its wrongness or outlandishness. Not that the single linguistic metaphor represents the highest moment of the poetic imagination; it probably does not. Dante, as Allen Tate reminds us, uses very few linguistic metaphors. The "greatest thing by far" which Aristotle had in mind when he spoke of the mastery of the metaphor as a sign of genius may very well have been the sort of prolonged analogy which Dante did use, in which the action takes place among the common things of concrete experience and yet yields an analogy—by nothing so crude as an allegorization wherein one thing is designated as standing for another but by the very density and thingness of the action. As Mr. Tate puts it: "Nature offers the symbolic poet clearly denotable objects in depth and in the round, which yield the analogies to the higher syntheses." Yet the fact remains that the linguistic metaphor is, for better or worse, more peculiarly accessible to the modern mind—it may indeed be a distinctive expression of modern sensibility. And it has the added advantage from my point of view of offering a concentrated field for investigation—here something very big happens in a very small place.

Metaphor has scandalized philosophers, including both scholastics and semioticians, because it seems to be wrong: it asserts an identity between two different things. And it is wrongest when

it is most beautiful. It is those very figures of Shakespeare which 18th century critics undertook to “correct” because they had so obviously gotten off the track logically and were sometimes even contradictory—it is just these figures which we now treasure most.

This element of outlandishness has resulted in philosophers’ washing their hands of beauty and literary men being glad that they have, in other words, in a divorce of beauty and ontology, with unhappy consequences to both. The difficulty has been that inquiries into the nature of metaphor have tended to be either literary or philosophical with neither side having much use for the other. The subject is divided into its formal and material aspects, with philosophers trying to arrive at the nature of metaphor by abstracting from all metaphors, beautiful and commonplace; with critics paying attention to the particular devices by which a poet brings off his effects. Beauty, the importance attached to beauty, marks the parting of the ways. The philosopher attends to the formal structure of metaphor, asking such general questions as, what is the relation between metaphor and myth? is metaphor an analogy of proper or improper proportionality? and in considering his thesis is notably insensitive to its beauties. In fact, the examples he chooses to dissect are almost invariably models of tastelessness, such as smiling meadow, leg of a table, John is a fox, etc. One can’t help wondering, incidentally, if Aristotle’s famous examples of “a cup as the shield of Ares” and “a cup as the shield of Dionysius” didn’t sound like typical philosopher’s metaphors to contemporary poets. Literary men, on the other hand, once having caught sight of the beauty of metaphor, once having experienced what Barfield called “that old authentic thrill which binds a man to his library for life,” are constrained to deal with beauty alone, with the particular devices which evoke the beautiful, and let the rest go. If the theorist is insensitive to the beauty of metaphor, the critic is insensitive to its ontology. To the question, why is this beautiful? the latter will usually give a *material* answer, pointing to this or

that effect which the poet has made use of. He is unsympathetic—and understandably so—to attempts to get hold of art by some larger schema, such as a philosophy of being—feeling in his bones that when the cold hand of theory reaches for beauty, it will succeed in grabbing everything except the beautiful.

Being neither critic nor philosopher, I feel free to venture into the no man's land between the two and to deal with those very metaphors which scandalize the philosopher because they are "wrong" and scandalize the critic because they are accidental. Philosophers don't think much of metaphor to begin with and critics can hardly have much use for folk metaphors, those cases where one stumbles into beauty without deserving it or working for it. Is it possible to get a line on metaphor, to figure out by a kind of lay empiricism what is going on in those poetic metaphors and folk metaphors where the wrongness most patently coincides with the beauty?

When the Mississippi Negro calls the Seeburg record player a *seabird*, it is not enough to say that he is making a mistake. It is also not enough to say that he is making a colorful and poetic contribution to language. It is less than useless to say that in calling a machine a bird he is regressing into totemism, etc. And it is not even accurate to say that he knows what the thing is and then gives it a picturesque if far-fetched name. In some fashion or other, he conceives the machine under the symbol *seabird*, a fashion, moreover, in regard to which we must be very wary in applying the words "right" or "wrong," "poetic" or "discursive," etc. Certainly the machine is not a seabird and no one imagines that it is, whatever the semanticists may say. Yet we may make a long cast and guess that in conceiving it as a *seabird*, the namer conceives it with richer overtones of meaning, and in some sense neither literal nor figurative, even as being more truly what it is than under its barbarous title, Seeburg automatic coin record player. There is a danger at this point in my being misunderstood as trying to strike a blow for the poetic against the

technical, feeling against science, and on the usual aesthetic grounds. But my intention is quite the reverse. I mean to call attention to the rather remarkable fact that in conceiving the machine under the “wrong” symbol *seabird*, we somehow know it better, conceive it in a more plenary fashion, have more immediate access to it, than under its descriptive title. The sooner we get rid of the old quarrel of artistic *vs* prosaic as constituting the grounds of our preference, the sooner we shall be able to understand what is going on. Given these old alternatives, I’ll take the prosaic any day—but what is going on here is of far greater moment.

The moments and elements of this meaning-situation are more easily grasped in the example of the boy seeing the strange bird in Alabama. The first notable moment occurred when he saw the bird. What struck him at once was the extremely distinctive character of the bird’s flight—its very great speed, the effect of alternation of the wings, the sudden plummeting into the woods. This so distinctive and incommunicable something—the word which occurs to one is Hopkins’ “inscape”—the boy perceived perfectly. It is this very uniqueness which Hopkins specifies in inscape: “the unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, selving.”

The next moment is, for our purposes, the most remarkable of all, because it can receive no explanation in the conventional sign theory of meaning. The boy, having perfectly perceived the flight of the hawk, now suffers a sort of disability, a tension, even a sense of imminence! He puts the peculiar question, *what is that bird?*, and puts it importunately. He is really anxious to know. But to know what? What sort of answer does he hope to hear? What in fact is the meaning of his extraordinary question? Why does he want an answer at all? He has already apprehended the hawk in the vividest, most plenary way—a sight he will never forget as long as he lives. What more will he

know by having the bird named? (No more, say the semioticians, and he deceives himself if he imagines that he does.)

We have come already to the heart of the question, and a very large question it is. For the situation of the boy in Alabama is very much the same sort of thing as what Cassirer calls the "mythico-religious Urphenomenon." Cassirer, following Uexküll and Spieth, emphasized the situation in which the primitive comes face to face with something which is both entirely new to him and strikingly distinctive, so distinctive that it might be said to have a *presence*—an oddly shaped termite mound, a particular body of water, a particular abandoned road. And it is in the two ways in which this tensional encounter is resolved that the Urphenomenon is said to beget metaphor and myth. The Tro or momentary god is born of the sense of unformulated presence of the thing; the metaphor arises from the symbolic act in which the emotional cry of the beholder becomes the vehicle by which the thing is conceived, the name of the thing. "In the vocables of speech and in primitive mythic configurations, the same inner process finds its consummation: they are both resolutions of an inner tension, the representation of subjective impulses and excitations in definite object forms and figures."

One recognizes the situation in one's own experience, that is, the metaphorical part of it. Everyone has a Blue Dollar Hawk in his childhood, especially if he grew up in the South or West where place names are so prone to poetic corruption. Chaisson Falls, named properly after its discoverer, becomes Chasin' Falls. Scapegoat Mountain, named after some Indian tale, becomes Scrapegoat Mountain—mythic wheels within wheels. And wonderfully: Purgatoire River becomes Picket Wire River. A boy grows up in the shadow of a great purple range called Music Mountain after some forgotten episode—perhaps the pioneers' first hoedown after they came through the pass. But this is not how the boy conceives it. When the late afternoon sun strikes the great pile in a certain light, the ridges turn gold, the cre-



vasses are cast into a thundering blue shadow, then it is that he imagines that the wind comes soughing down the gorges with a deep organ note. The name, mysterious to him, tends to validate some equally mysterious inscape of the mountain.

So far so good. But the question on which everything depends and which is too often assumed to be settled without ever having been asked is this: given this situation and its two characteristics upon which all agree, the peculiar presence or distinctiveness of the object beheld and the peculiar need of the beholder—is this “need” and its satisfaction instrumental or ontological? That is to say: is it the function of metaphor merely to diminish tension, or is it a discoverer of being? Does it fit into the general scheme of need-satisfactions?—and here it doesn’t matter much whether we are talking about the ordinary pragmatic view or Cassirer’s symbolic form: both operate in an instrumental mode, one, that of biological adaption, the other, according to the necessities of the mythic consciousness. Neither provides for a real knowing, a truth-saying about what a being is. Or is it of such a nature that at least two sorts of realities must be allowed: one, the distinctive something beheld; two, the beholder (actually *two* beholders, one who gives the symbol and one who receives the symbol as meaningful, the Namer and Hearer) whose special, if imperfect gift it is to know and affirm this something for what it actually is? The question can’t be bracketted, for the two paths lead in opposite directions, and everything one says henceforth on the subject must be understood from one or the other perspective. In this primitive encounter which is at the basis of man’s cognitive orientation in the world, either we are trafficking in psychological satisfactions or we are dealing with that unique joy which marks man’s ordainment to being and the knowing of it.

We come back to the “right” and “wrong” of Blue Dollar Hawk and Blue Darter Hawk. Is it proper to ask if the boy’s delight at the “wrong” name is a psychological or ontological delight? And if the wrong name is cognitive, how is it cognitive?

At any rate, we know that the hawk is named for the boy and he has what he wants. His mind, which had really suffered a sort of hunger (an ontological hunger?), now has something to feast on. The bird is, he is told, a Blue Dollar Hawk. Two conditions, it will be noticed, must be met if the naming is to succeed. There must be an authority behind it—if the boy's brother had made up the name on the spur of the moment, it wouldn't have worked. Naming is more than a matter of a semantic "rule." But apparently there must also be—and here is the scandal—an element of obscurity about the name. The boy can't help but be disappointed by the logical modifier, Blue Darter Hawk—he feels that although he has asked what the bird *is*, his father has only told him what it *does*. If we will prescind for a moment from premature judgments about the "pre-logical" or magic character of the boy's preference, and also forego the next question, why is it called a Blue Dollar Hawk? which the boy may or may not have put but probably did not because he knew there was no logical answer the guide could give<sup>1</sup>—the function of the answer will become clearer. It is connected with the circumstance that the mysterious name, Blue Dollar Hawk, is both the "right" name—for it has been given in good faith by a Namer who should know and carries an *ipso facto* authority—and a "wrong" name—for it is not applicable as a logical modifier as Blue Darter is immediately and univocally applicable. Blue Dollar is not applicable as a modifier at all, for it refers to a *something else* beside the bird, a something which occupies the same ontological status as the bird. Blue Darter tells us something about the bird, what it does, what its color is; Blue Dollar tells, or the boy hopes it will tell, what the bird *is*. *For this ontological pairing, or, if you prefer, "error" of identification of word and thing, is the only possible way in which the apprehended nature of the bird, its inscape, can be validated as being what it is.* This

<sup>1</sup>Or if the guide did give an answer, it would be its very farfetchedness which would satisfy: "They calls him that because of the way he balls hisself up and rolls—"

inscape is, after all, otherwise ineffable. I can describe it, make crude approximations by such words as darting, oaring, speed, dive, etc., but none of these will suffice to affirm this so distinctive something which I have seen. This is why, as Marcel has observed, when I ask what something is, I am more satisfied to be given a name even if the name means nothing to me (especially if?), than to be given a scientific classification. Shelley said that poetry pointed out the before unapprehended relations of things. Wouldn't it be closer to the case to say that poetry validates that which had already been privately apprehended but had gone unformulated for both of us?

Without getting over one's head with the larger question of truth, one might still guess that it is extraordinarily rash of the positivist to limit truth to the logical approximation—to say that we cannot know what things are but only how they hang together. The copy theory gives no account of the *what* we are saying *how* about. As to the *what*: since we are not angels, it is true that we cannot know what it is intuitively and as it is in itself. The modern semiotician is scandalized by the metaphor, flesh is grass; but he is also scandalized by the naming sentence, this is flesh. As Professor Veatch has pointed out, he is confusing an instrument of knowing with what is known. The word *flesh* is not this solid flesh, and this solid flesh is not grass. But unless we name it *flesh* we shall not know it at all, and unless we call flesh grass we shall not know how it is with flesh. The semiotician leaves unexplained the act of knowing. He imagines naively that I know what this is and then give it a label, whereas the truth is, as Cassirer has shown so impressively, that I cannot know anything at all unless I symbolize it. We can only *conceive* being, sidle up to it by laying something else alongside. We approach the thing not directly but by pairing, by apposing symbol and thing. Is it not premature to say with the mythist that when the primitive calls the lightning serpentine, he conceives it as a snake and is logically wrong? Both truth and error

may be served here, error in so far as the lightning is held to participate magically in snakesness, truth in so far as the conception of snake may allow the privately apprehended inscape of the lightning to be formulated. I would have a horror of finding myself allied with those who in the name of instrumentality or inner warmth or whatnot would so attenuate and corrupt truth that it meant nothing. But an analysis of the symbol-relation reveals aspects of truth which go far beyond the notion of structural similarity which the symbolic logicians speak of. Two other traits of the thing are discovered and affirmed: one, that it *is*; two, that it is *something*.

Everything depends on this distinction between the thing privately apprehended and the thing apprehended and validated for you and me by naming. But is it proper to make such a distinction? Is there any difference, no difference, or the greatest possible difference, between that which I privately apprehend and that which I apprehend and you validate by naming in such a way that I am justified in hoping that you “mean” that very ineffable thing?

For at the basis of the beautiful metaphor—which one begins to see as neither logically “right” nor “wrong” but analogous—at the basis of that heightened sensibility of the poetic experience, there is always the hope that this secret apprehension of my own, which I cannot call knowing because I do not even know that I know it, has a chance of being validated by what you have said.

There must be a space between name and thing, for otherwise the private apprehension is straitened and oppressed. What is required is that the thing be both sanctioned and yet allowed freedom to be what it is. Heidegger said that the essence of truth is freedom. The essence of metaphorical truth and the almost impossible task of the poet is, it seems to me, to name unmistakably and yet to name by such a gentle analogy that the thing beheld by both of us may be truly formulated for what it is.

Blackmur's and Empson's examples are better "mistakes" than mine. The street sign in Cambridge, *Private Way Dangerous Passing*, misunderstood, allowed the exciting possibility that it was one's own secret forebodings about the little dead-end streets that was meant. But for all of Blackmur's unsurpassed analysis of this mysterious property of language, I think it unfortunate that he has chosen to call it "gesture," in view of the semiotician's use of the word to denote a term in a stimulus-response sequence (i.e., Mead's "conversation of gesture")—because this is exactly what it is not. It is a figurational and symbolic import in that sense which is farthest removed from gestural intercourse (such as the feint and parry of Mead's two boxers). It is, in fact, only when the gesture, word, or thing, is endowed with symbolic meaning, that is, united with a significance other than itself, that it takes on the properties which Blackmur attributes to it.

In Empson's examples, the beauty of the line depends on an actual misreading of what the poet wrote or on a corruption of the spelling. In the former case the poetic instincts of the reader are better than the poet's. What is important is that the reader's "mistake" has rescued the poet's figure from the logical and univocal similarity which the poet despite his best efforts could not escape and placed it at a mysterious and efficacious distance. The remembering of Brooke's *unpassioned machine* as *impassioned machine* is a good example of this. Another is a line of Nash which may or may not have been a mistake. What matters for our purpose is that it could have been.

Beauty is but a flower  
Which wrinkles will devour.  
Brightness falls from the air.

There is a cynical theory, Empson writes, that Nash wrote or meant *hair*:

Brightness falls from the hair.

which is appropriate to the context, adequate poetically but less beautiful. Why? I refer to Professor Empson's analysis and venture only one comment. It may be true, as he says, that the very pre-Raphaelite vagueness of the line allows the discovery of something quite definite. In the presence of the lovely but obscure metaphor, I exist in the mode of hope, hope that the poet may mean such and such, and joy at any further evidence that he does. What Nash's line may have stumbled upon (if it is a mistake) is a perfectly definite but fugitive something—an inscape familiar to one and yet an inscape in bondage because I have never formulated it and it has never been formulated for me. Could the poet be referring to that particular time and that particular phenomenon of clear summer evenings when the upper air holds the last trembling light of day: one final moment of a soft diffused brilliance, then everything *falls* into dusk?

But Empson's most entertaining mistake is

Queenlily June with a rose in her hair  
 Moves to her prime with a langorous air.

For what saves the verse from mediocrity is the misreading of queenlily as Queen Lily, where the poet had intended the rather dreary adverb of queenly! Again I defer to Professor Empson's *material* analysis of what gives the misread line its peculiar charm. The question I would raise, in regard to this and many other examples in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, has to do with Empson's main thesis. This thesis is, of course, that beauty derives from ambiguity—in this particular case, the felt possibility and interaction of the *two* readings of *queenlily*. But I submit that in this and other examples, as I read it and apparently as Empson read it, *the intended adverbial reading is completely overlooked!* The line is read with Queenlily and is charming; it only belatedly occurs to one, if it occurs at all, that the poet meant the adverb—and I feel certain Empson is not maintaining that I was aware of

the adverb all along but “unconsciously.” What one wonders, in this and in many other of Empson’s quotations, is whether it is the ambiguity which is the operative factor, or *whether the beauty does not derive exclusively from the obscure term of the ambiguity*, the logically “wrong” but possibly analogous symbol.

In all those cases where the poet strains at the limits of the logical and the univocal, and when as a result his figure retains a residue of the logical and so has two readings: the univocal and the analogous—is it not in the latter that he has struck gold? We must be careful not to confuse ambiguity, which means equivocity, with true analogy, simply because both are looked upon as more or less vague. It is always possible, of course, to do what Empson does so well with his obscure metaphors, that is, to cast about for all the different interpretations the line will allow. But does the beauty of the line reside in its susceptibility to two or more possible readings or in the possibility of a *single* figurational meaning, which is the less analyzable as it is the more beautiful?

I can’t help thinking, incidentally, that this hunt for the striking catachrestic metaphor in a poet of another time, such as Chaucer or Shakespeare, is a very treacherous game. For both the old poet and his modern reader are at the mercy of time’s trick of cancelling the poet’s own hard won figures and setting up new ones of its own. A word, by the very fact of its having been lost to common usage or by its having undergone a change in meaning, is apt to acquire thereby an unmerited potency.

One is aware of skirting the abyss as soon as one begins to repose virtue in the obscure. Once we eliminate the logical approximation, the univocal figure, as unpoetic and uncreative of meaning—is it not then simply an affair of trotting out words and images more or less at random in the hope of arriving at an obscure, hence efficacious, analogy? and the more haphazard the better, since mindfulness, we seem to be saying, is of its very nature, self-defeating? Such in fact is the credo of the surrealists:



“To compare two objects, as remote from one another in character as possible, or by any other method put them together in a sudden and striking fashion, this remains the highest task to which poetry can aspire.”<sup>2</sup> There is something to this. If, as so many modern poets appear to do, one simply shuffles words together, words plucked from as diversified contexts as possible, one will get some splendid effects. Words are potent agents and the sparks are bound to fly. But it is a losing game. For there is missing that essential element of the meaning situation, the authority and intention of the Namer. Where the Namer means nothing or does not know what he means or the Hearer does not think he knows what he means, the Hearer can hardly participate in a co-intention. Intersubjectivity fails. Once the good faith of the Namer is so much as called into question, the jig is up. There is no celebration or hope of celebration of a thing beheld in common. One is only trafficking in the stored-up energies of words, hard won by meaningful usage. It is a pastime, this rolling out the pretty marbles of word-things to see one catch and reflect the fire of another, a pleasant enough game but one which must eventually go stale.

It is the cognitive dimension of metaphor which is usually overlooked, because cognition is apt to be identified with conceptual and discursive knowing. Likeness and difference are canons of discursive thought, but analogy, the mode of poetic knowing, is also cognitive. Failure to recognize the discovering power of analogy can only eventuate in a noncognitive psychological theory of metaphor. There is no knowing, there is no Namer and Hearer, there is no world beheld in common; there is only an interior “transaction of contexts” in which psychological processes interact to the reader’s titillation.

The peculiar consequences of judging poetic metaphor by discursive categories are especially evident in Professor Richards’

<sup>2</sup>André Breton, quoted by Richards in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*.



method. Lord Kames had criticized the metaphor “steep’d” in Othello’s speech

Had it pleas’d heaven  
To try me with affliction, had he rain’d  
All kinds of sores, and shames, on my bare head,  
Steep’d me in poverty to the very lips,

by saying that “the resemblance is too faint to be agreeable—Poverty must here be conceived to be a fluid which it resembles not in any manner.” Richards goes further: “It is not a case of lack of resemblances but too much diversity, too much sheer oppositeness. For Poverty, the Tenor, is a state of deprivation, of desiccation; but the vehicle—the sea or vat in which Othello is to be steep’d—gives an instance of superfluity . . .” True, disparity as well as resemblance works in metaphor, but Richards says of this instance of disparity: “I do not myself find any defence of the word except this, which seems indeed quite sufficient—as dramatic necessities commonly are—that Othello is himself horribly disordered, that the utterance is part of the ‘storm of horror and outrage’.” Thus, Professor Richards gives “steep’d” a passing mark, but only because Othello is crazy. He may be right: the figure is extravagant, in a sense “wrong,” yet to me defensible even without a plea of insanity. The only point I wish to make is that there is another cognitive ground on which it can be judged besides that of logical rightness and wrongness, univocal likeness and unlikeness. Judged accordingly, it must always be found wanting—an 18th century critic would have corrected it. But do the alternatives lie between logical sense and nonsense? Or does such a view overlook a third way, the relation of analogy and its cognitive dimension? In the mode of analogy, “steep’d” is not only acceptable, it is striking; “steep’d” may be wrong univocally but right analogically. True, poverty is, logically speaking, a deprivation; but in its figuration it is a veritable something, very much a milieu with a smell and taste

all its own, in which one is all too easily steep'd. Poverty is defined as a lack but is conceived as a something. What is univocally unlike in every detail may exhibit a figurative proportionality which is more generative of meaning than the cleverest simile.

An unvarying element in the situation is a pointing at by context. There must occur a preliminary meeting of minds and a mutually intended subject before anything can be said at all. The context may vary all the way from a literal pointing-by-finger and naming in the aboriginal naming act, to the pointing context of the poem which specifies the area where the metaphor is to be applied. There is a reciprocal relationship between the selectivity of the pointing and the univocity of the metaphor: the clearer the context and the more unmistakable the pointing, the greater latitude allowed the analogy of the metaphor. The aboriginal naming act is, in this sense, the most obscure and the most creative of metaphors; no modern poem was ever as obscure as Miss Sullivan's naming water *water* for Helen Keller. A perfectly definite something is pointed at and given a name, a sound or a gesture to which it bears only the most tenuous analogical similarities.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>The old debate, started in the *Cratylus*, goes on as lively as ever: what is the relation between the name and the thing, between the word *green* and the color green, between *slice* and slice, *tree* and tree? Most linguists would probably say there is no relation, that the name is purely an arbitrary convention (except in a few cases like *boom*), that any seeming resemblance is false onomatopoeia (no matter how much you might imagine that *slice* resembles and hence expresses the act of slicing, it really does not).

But here again, do likeness and unlikeness exhaust the possibilities?

Apparently not. Curtius remarks that "despite all change, a conservative instinct is discernible in language. All the peoples of our family from the Ganges to the Atlantic designate the notion of standing by the phonetic group *sta-*; in all of them the notion of flowing is linked with the group *plu*, with only slight modifications. This cannot be an accident. Assuredly the same notion has remained associated with the same sounds through all the millenia, because the peoples felt a certain *inner connection* between the two, i.e., because of an instinct to express this notion by these particular sounds. The assertion that the oldest words presuppose some relation between sounds and the representations they designate has often been ridiculed. It is difficult, however, to explain the origin of language without such assumptions." (Quoted by Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, p. 191)

It is this "inner connection" which concerns us. The sounds *plu* and *sta*, which could hardly be more different from the acts of flowing and standing, must nevertheless exhibit some mysterious connection which the mind fastens upon, a connection which, since it is not a kind of univocal likeness, must be a kind of analogy.

Given the situation of Naming and Hearing, there can only be one of three issues to an act of pointing at and naming. What is said will either be old, that is, something we already know and know quite overtly; or something new, and if it is utterly new, I can only experience bafflement; or new-old, that is, something that I had privately experienced but which was not available to me because it had never been formulated and rendered inter-subjective. Metaphor is the true maker of language.

The creative relationship of *inscape*, the distinctive reality as it is apprehended, and the distanced metaphor is illustrated by Hopkins' nature metaphors. His favorite pursuit in the nature journals is the application of striking (sometimes strained) like-yet-unlike metaphors to nature inscapes. There are some pleasing effects. A bolt of lightning is

a straight stroke, broad like a stroke with chalk and liquid,  
as if the blade of an oar just stripped open a ribbon scar in  
smooth water and it caught the light.

We are aware that the effect is achieved by applying the notions of water and scars to lightning, the most unwaterlike or unscar-like thing imaginable. But are these metaphors merely pleasing or shocking or do they discover?—discover an aspect of the thing which had gone unformulated before?

Clouds are called variously bars, rafters, prisms, mealy, scarves, curds, rocky, a river (of dull white cloud), rags, veils, tatters, bosses.

The sea is

paved with wind . . . bushes of foam

Chips of foam blew off and gadded about without  
weight in the air.

Straps of glassy spray.

In these metaphors both the likeness and unlikeness are striking and easily discernible. One has the impression, moreover, that their discovering power has something to do with their unlikeness, the considerable space between tenor and vehicle. Hard things like rocks, bosses, chips, glass, are notably unlike clouds and water; yet one reads

Chips of foam blew off and gadded about

with a sure sense of validation.

If we deviate in either direction, toward a more univocal or accustomed likeness or toward a more mysterious unlikeness, we feel at once the effect of what Richards calls the tension of the bow, both the slackening and tightening of it. When one reads fleecy clouds or woolly clouds, the effect is slack indeed. Vehicle and tenor are totally inter-articulated: clouds are ordinarily conceived as being fleecy; fleecy is what clouds are (just as checkered is what a career is). You have told me nothing. Fleecy cloud, leg of a table, are tautologies, a regurgitation of something long since digested. But

A straight river of dull white cloud

is lively. One feels both knowledgeable and pleased. But

A white shire of cloud

is both more interesting and more obscure. The string of the bow is definitely tightened. The mind is off on its favorite project, a casting about for analogies and connections. Trusting in the good faith of the Namer, I begin to wonder if he means thus and so—this particular sort of cloud. The only “shire” I know is a geographical area and what I more or less visualize is a towering cumulus of an irregular shire-shape.

Two levels of analogy-making can be distinguished here.

There is the level of metaphor proper, the saying about one thing that it is something else: one casts about to see *how* a cloud can be a shire, and in hitting on an analogy, one validates an in-scape of cloud. But there is the more primitive level of naming, of applying a sound to a thing, and of the certification of some sounds as being analogous to the thing without being like it (as in the mysterious analogy between *plu* and flowing, *sta* and standing). Thus *shire* may be applicable to a certain kind of cloud *purely as a sound* and without a symbolized meaning of its own. For as it happens, concrete nouns beginning with *sh* often refer to objects belonging to a class of segmented or sectioned or roughly oblong flattened objects, a “geographical” class: shape, sheath, shard, sheet, shelf, shield, shire, shoal, shovel, shroud, etc. One speculates that the vocable *sh*—is susceptible of this particular spatial configuration. (I easily imagine that the sound *sh* has a flatness or parallelness about it.) This relation is very close to the psychological phenomenon of synaesthesia, the trans-sensory analogy in which certain sounds, for example, are characteristically related to certain colors—*blue* to color blue (could blue ever be called *yellow*?).

To summarize: the examples given of an accidental blundering into authentic poetic experience both in folk mistakes and in mistaken readings of poetry are explored for what light they may shed on the function of metaphor in man’s fundamental symbolic orientation in the world. This “wrongness” of metaphor is seen to be not a vagary of poets but a special case of that mysterious “error” which is the very condition of our knowing anything at all. This “error,” the act of symbolization, is itself the instrument of knowing and is an error only if we do not appreciate its intentional character. If we do not take note of it, or if we try to exorcize it as a primitive residue, we shall find ourselves on the horns of the same dilemma which has plagued philosophers since the 18th century. The semanticists, on the one horn, imply that we know as the angels know, directly and

without mediation (although saying in the next breath that we have no true knowledge of reality); all that remains is to name what we know and this we do by a semantic "rule"; but they do not and cannot say how we know. The behaviorists, on the other, imply that we do not know at all but only respond and that even art is a mode of sign-response; but they do not say how they know this. But we do know, not as the angels know and not as dogs know but as men who must know one thing through the mirror of another.