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SOME REMARKS CONCERNING 'POETIC LANGUAGE'

Most generative studies of poetry were based on the belief, either directly stated or just presupposed, that the body of texts we call literature should be systematically distinguishable from other texts on the basis of intrinsic grammatical or textual properties. In this they followed the tradition of Russian Formalist criticism, with its conviction that the relation between poetic and non-poetic language is one of opposition, and that poetics and linguistics are thus mutually exclusive, each discovering and specifying distinct sets of laws. Generative theorists never questioned this either-or conception of poeticalness: they found it very convenient, as they were well aware of the fact that any grammar devised to generate the lines that occur in poetry and not at the same time generate a great many unsatisfactory 'ordinary' sentences would have to be unmanageably complex. Thus L e v i n [1964] talked about 'grammars of ordinary language' and 'grammars of poetic language' (p. 27); B i e r- w i s c h [1970] suggests a Poetic Structure grammar attached to a grammar of natural language; and V a n D i j k [1972] distinguishes between 'normal' and 'literary' grammars.

An extreme product of a similar way of thinking, and perhaps of the New Critical aesthetics seeing each poem as a self-sufficient, linguistically unique symbolic object, is J. P. T h o r- n e's [1965] proposal that separate grammars be constructed, different from the grammars of Standard English, to generate individual poems. Such grammars would be immanent, i.e. based on the categories established for a particular text. As Thorne explains, 'Behind the idea of constructing what is in effect a grammar for the poem lies the idea that what the poet had done is to create a new language, or dialect' [T h o r n e 1975: 194]. One

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difficulty of such an approach lies in writing grammars necessarily based on a very small body of data; but the more serious argument against this proposal might be that it acts against what is known as Ockham's Razor - the principle of ontological economy according to which entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity.

Within the general belief that it must be possible to differentiate at the formal grammatical level between literary and non-literary texts, many linguists have sought to find 'indicators of poeticalness' - attributes that would uniquely define poetic texts. Several such indicators were suggested: deviation from grammaticalness, figurativeness, versification, ambiguity, equivalent structures, etc. [cf. J a k o b s o n 1960, 1965; S t a n k i e w i c z 1961; L e v i n 1963, 1964; L e e c h 1966; B i e r w i s c h 1970; and other authors in the collections of articles: F r e e m a n 1970, and C h a t m a n 1971]. The authors of these suggestions, however, preferred to overlook the obvious fact that these linguistic phenomena, although they must be accounted for in any literary analysis, are also found to occur outside literary works. Rhythmic organization and syntactic patterning may be found in any 'ordinary' conversation. People often deliberately produce ambiguous messages, and the question 'What did he mean by saying that?' is one that we may ask ourselves several times during a day. As for grammatical deviance, usually equated by transformational grammarians with 'figures of speech', it also occurs quite frequently in all varieties of non-poetic communication. In fact, metaphor, usually thought of as the 'most poetic' feature of literary language, is also one of the most common and most essential features of any kind of communication. Even the scientific language, commonly viewed as the most prosaic, relies on metaphor to convey its message. Biologists speak about the language of the genetic code, about letters and words of that language; physicists talk about parent atoms and daughter atoms; and information scientists, about the memory of computers and storing information by means of packets of electrical charges. As for philosophers, consider this fragment from W i t t g e n- s t e i n's   *Philosophical Grammar:*

It's almost unbelievable, the way in which a problem gets completely barricaded in by the misleading expressions which generation upon generation throw up for miles around it, so that it becomes virtually impossible to get at it. (p. 466).

With this in mind, it is particularly hard to accept the fact that generative grammarians consistently used the terms 'deviant' and 'anomalous' to refer to figurative language. This, of course, was just another way of expressing the belief that metaphors were alien to, or parasitic on, the 'normal' usage. At the same time, there was general confusion over what constituted a metaphor at all.

Some linguists felt it necessary to distinguish between 'meaningful metaphors' and 'mere anomalies'. D r a n g e [1966] distinguishes between 'loud smells' and 'loud colours', regarding the former as 'meaningless' and accepting the latter for the strange reason that "in the American College Dictionary, the 7th meaning given to *loud* is »excessively striking to the eye, or offensively showy, as colours, dress, etc.«" (p. 14).

B i c k e r t o n [1969] will accept 'bachelor girl' as metaphorical, but not 'spinster boy'; 'green thumb', but not 'green ears'; and 'poverty gripped the town', but not 'ability gripped the town'. He writes:

> Faced, on the one hand, with utterances such as "she has stabbed my self-respect" or "quiet donkeying with my car", and, on the other hand, with utterances such as "hearts that spaniel'd me at heels" or its humble forerunner "to dog someone's footsteps" - any native speaker of English should be able not merely to distinguish between them, but to recognize the first pair as probably products of a non-native, the second as showing evidence of more than average skill in exploiting the resources of language. To equate these two seems to me a denial of all that language is. (p. 51).

To explain these curious intuitions, Bickerton resorts to the notion of 'specific attribute of meaning' - particular quality, essentially connotative, the attachement of which is, as he says, the pre-condition of metaphorical creation. Thus to *iron* is assigned the attribute 'hardness', which accounts for the fact that '*iron* can combine with *will* or *discipline*, whereas *steel* cannot' (p. 57). This hardly explains anything, and the assignment of the attribute is a fairly arbitrary process. It is unclear how Bickerton would propose to account for more creative metaphors. Why shouldn't a poet opt for 'steel will' to avoid the worn-out expression? And why should anyone abstain from using the phrase 'green ears' metaphorically, e.g. to mean that some young person is not used to hearing abusive language? It is worth noting, incidentally, that this 'anomalous' phrase is actually perfectly well--formed and might as well be used literally (with the current

> For love is the kind of a tree whose fruit
> grows not on the branches, but at the root.
>
> *This is What the Watchbird Sings*

A domain of experience may be structured and understood in more than one way, i.e. it may have several metaphorical cognitive models, not consistent with each other. Thus, elsewhere, Patten speaks of 'the mad, mangled crocodiles of love' *(Party Piece)*; this phrase seems to be sharing a conceptual gestalt with the expressions we use when we describe someone as completely 'consumed', 'eaten up' or 'swallowed up' by love. This metaphor obviously brings into focus quite different aspects of the concept LOVE than we saw highlighted in the previous case.

Two poets use the DARKNESS IS A SOLID OBJECT metaphor, which conventionally allows us to speak of 'darkness falling' and of 'impenetrable darkness': John Ashbery writes of a 'solid block of darkness' (The Young Prince and the Young Princess); and another line from A s h b e r y's poem reads:

> You twist the darkness in your fingers
>
> *How Much Longer*

In Charles   T o m l i n s o n's words,

> dark hardens from blue, effacing the windows:
> a tangible block.
>
> *(Tramontana at Lerici)*

Even the apparently so strange

> So I have to put my face into her voice, a shiny
>   baize-lined canister
>
> (R. F i s h e r,   *Interior I)*

is only an instance of the same conceptual metaphor (VOICE IS A CONTAINER) which is realized in the common 'there was admiration in her voice' and in 'her voice contained a threat'. Metaphors such as this one seem to be grounded by virtue of systematic correlates within our experience: it most probably emerges from the fact that when one speaks, the range of the sound waves one sends (i.e. the distance from which another person can hear one) is a bounded physical space.

Like metaphors, also metonymic concepts (where one entity is used for another related to it) are grounded in our experience and systematically structured. In the case of such gene-

ral metonymies functioning in our culture as e.g. PARTS OF THE
BODY FOR THE PERSON, we pick out the appropriate entities acting
on direct physical associations (here, linking the parts of the
body with their characteristic activities). Again, examples may
be found both in the 'ordinary' and the 'poetic' use of language.
Some examples from poetry are:

I saw a face appear
which called me dear
    (R. C r e e l e y,
         Just Friends)

A mouth about to give up smoking
    (L. F e r l i n g h e t t i,
         Pictures of the Gone World)

Not all figurative expressions, of course, are instances
of already existing conceptual structures, parts of larger
metaphorical systems. An example of a novel metaphor comes from
the poetry of Mina Loy:

Our Universe is only
A colourless onion
You derobe
Sheath by sheath
    Remaining
A disheartening odour
About your nervy hands
         Love Songs

This metaphor is outside our conventional system of concepts.
It allows us to conceptualize the less concrete, inherently
vaguer entity in terms of the object we understand more readily;
our knowledge and experience of onions, (they make you weep,
eating too much onion may cause indigestion, etc.) influence
the way we see the more abstract entity. The complete lack
hitherto of any mental connection between the two domains of
experience makes the metaphor all the more memorable.

Contrary to generative theories of metaphor, which suggested
that all similarities between parts of the metaphor are objective,
i.e. inherent in the entities involved, expressible as shared
semantic features, Lakoff and Johnson speak of metaphors creating
similarities. Thus love is neither inherently similar to a plant,
nor to a beast of prey, and the Universe is not inherently simi-
lar to an onion; such similarities arise as a r e s u l t of con-
ceptual metaphors, and they are based on interactional properties,
reflecting the way in which we conceive of objects and phenomena.

As Lakoff and Johnson emphatically argue, 'New metaphors have the power to create new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. If a new metaphor enters the conceptual system that we base our actions on, it will alter that conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to'. *(op. cit.,* p. 145) Lakoff and Johnson never even mention poetry in their book, yet we cannot fail to note that the views they express (rather original for linguists), strikingly resemble the claims put forward by literary theoreticians of the avant-garde. We might here quote Susan S o n t a g [1961, p. 296]: "Art today is a new kind of instrument, an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility"; and Kenneth Rexroth has said of cubist poetry: 'poetry such as this attempts not just a new syntax of the word. Its revolution is aimed at the syntax of the mind itself'. [in R o t h e n b e r g 1974: 199].

It is worth noting in this context that metaphors for [poetry] itself have changed in time. Modernist poetry, for instance, is structured, understood, performed and talked about in terms of the metaphor POEMS ARE MATERIAL OBJECTS. This metaphor, which Lakoff and Johnson would label 'ontological', seems so natural that it is often taken as self-evident, direct description; we must not forget, however, of the various orientations that prefer to view poems as abstract entities: outbursts of emotion, visions, 'sweet celestial music', etc. The fact that poems are conceived as physical objects finds reflection in language: we read of 'making elegant poems', of 'poems irrevocably blue' (K. Koch) or alternatively, 'red, and as hard as chalk, and producible from everything' (F. Mayrocker), or we are told that 'a cold wind blows through the holes in the poem' (H. Graham). An impressive linguistic rendering of the idea comes from Michael M c C l u r e when he says of a poem:

        I PICK IT UP BY THE TAIL AND HIT
            YOU OVER THE HEAD WITH IT
        WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP WHAP

                        Hymn to St. Geryon
                    (capitals by the poet)

We speak of 'literary production' and 'literary constructions'. The words and phrases of which the poem is made are consequently viewed as 'building blocks'. Even the feelings, traditionally

viewed as the immaterial element of lyric poetry, can be seen as having substance:

> The feelings go up into the air
> Rising in lines that are straight until they bump
> Into something
>
> (M. B e n e d i k t, *Some Feelings*)

To these examples of metaphorically substantial nature of poetry, we might add a citation from Mayakovsky which implicitly contains the idea that the 'greatness' of poetry is proportional to the number of elements available for mechanical combination:

> Shakespeare and Byron possessed 80,000 words in all;
> The future genius-poet shall in every minute
> Possess 80,000,000,000 words, squared.
>
> (transl. G. Fitzgerald)

The same idea that more of form is more of content, the product of thinking of linguistic constructions in spatial terms, is evident in iterations such as

> ...afternoons and afternoons and afternoons...

(this comes from a Helmut Heissenbutel poem, but could well be encountered in 'everyday' talk), which is supposed to indicate more afternoons than if the noun were used only once. It seems that Gertrude Stein's notorious apparent tautology

> A rose is a rose is a rose

plays precisely upon this habit of the readers to expect more content where there is more of form.

Many operations used to produce modernist texts involve physical manipulation of linguistic forms to support the conceptual content of the poem. Thus the language of a poem may be fragmented to represent the complexity of a perceptual act (as in the 'cubist' poems of Gertrude Stein); it may be inflated to unusual dimension to accompany the exaggeration in the content; by taking a lot of time to read, a poem may represent the passage of time; or the lines may be permuted to create an impression of chaos. In E. E. Cummings's poem below, for example, the mass of linguistic chaos iconically represents the fluttering of a handful of confetti which, having been hurled into the air, now chaotically descends to the ground:

```
life hurl my
yes, crumbles hand/ful released conarefetti/ev ery flitter, ing
a mil/lions of aflickf/litter ing brightmillion ofS hurl; ed in
whom  areEyes shy-dodge is bright crumbshandful, Quick-hurl who
is  flittercrumbs,  fluttercrimbs  are floatfallin,q;  allwhere
a:  crimbflitteringishis  are   floatsis  ingfallall! mil,  shy
milbright
my/hurl flicker handful
in/dodging are shybrighteyes is crum bs/all/if, eyEs
```

In a poem by Ernst Jandl, THIRD TRY SUCCESSFUL, we find another good
example of blurring the distinction between the physical form and
the evoked image:

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he tries to put a bulthroughlet his brain
he tries to put a bthurloulghet his brain
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$$he\ puts\ \left\{ \begin{array}{c} a \\ through\ his \end{array} \right\} bburlalient$$

The words 'reversals' 'inversions', 'combine', 'compose', 'cen-
ter', 'rearrangement' or 'infinity' are often used by critics
discussing modernist poetry. This use of spatial and temporal
terms to describe linguistic operations is no doubt facilitated
by the conception of poems as physical objects, if it is not
its direct consequence. Reading poetry such as discussed above
makes us more conscious of the fact that language is grounded
in our physical experience, and may inspire the search for the new
ways of expressing this fact.

     R u s s e l l [1981] observes: 'the common assumption of all
avant-gardes is that new forms of expression and perception
lead to new states of consciousness and action'. (p. 12). This
is probably where we should look for the difference between
'poetic' and 'ordinary' utterances. While there are no absolute
differentiating criteria as far as the language is concerned,
(although, statistically, in a poetic text language is usually
much less redundant, and the density of figurative expressions
higher than in everyday conversation), the difference seems to
be   lying in this driving ambition of the poets (but also
slogan-makers, advertising experts, speech-writers, etc.) of re-
structuring conceptual structures of other people. With the big
audiences some of the poets reach, they have a bigger chance of
success than ever before. It is heartening that there develops a
linguistic theory which, through its emphasis on the conceptual
basis of all linguistic activity, will be able to closely monitor
these efforts.

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KILKA UWAG O JĘZYKU POETYCKIM

Pisząc o poezji, językoznawcy ze szkoły generatywnej opierali się na założeniu, że teksty literackie posiadają pewne właściwości formalne różniące je od innych tekstów. Postulowano oddzielne gramatyki dla 'zwyczajnego języka' i 'języka poetyckiego', wskazując na cechy jakoby unikalne dla 'języka poetyckiego' (np. metaforyczność, wieloznaczność, 'dewiacje' składniowe, organizację rytmiczną, etc.). Autorzy tych sugestii zdają się jednak nie zauważać faktu, że wszystkie te zjawiska występują również w tekstach nieliterackich. Metafory np., traktowane przez nich jako swego rodzaju 'anomalie', są nieodłączną częścią naszego codziennego myślenia i mówienia o rzeczach i zdarzeniach. Tak więc, zamiast postulować osobne gramatyki dla języka poezji, należałoby raczej poszukać takiej teorii, która lepiej dawałaby sobie radę z opisem 'barwnego' języka, niezależnie od tego, w jakim tekście został użyty. Wydaje się, że do tego zadania najlepiej przygotowana jest teoria kognitywna. Przykładem na to może być jej odkrywcze podejście do kwestii metafory.