Mimesis and Metaphor

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"Representation", "imitation" and "mirroring" have proved to be insufficient translations of the concept of mimesis. Walter Benjamin's notion of "mimetic potential" offers a different view on the qualities of mimesis. Benjamin stresses the importance of language and its mediality to mimesis; for him language is the "höchste Stufe des mimetischen Verhaltens und das vollkommenste Archiv der unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit" (Benjamin 1991, Bd. II/1, 213) He considers mimesis on the level of linguistic mediality.

In the following I will try to outline the mimetic potential of metaphors in literary texts which focus on their linguistic mediality. As Paul Ricoeur suggests, "the possibility that metaphorical discourse says something about reality collides with the apparent constitution of poetic discourse, which seems to be essentially non-referential and centred on itself. To this non-referential conception of poetic discourse I oppose the idea that the suspension of literal reference is the condition for the release of a power of second-degree reference which is properly poetic reference. Thus, to use an expression borrowed from Jakobson, one must not speak only of split sense but of 'split reference' as well." (Ricoeur 1977, 6)

Differing from Ricoeur's speculative and hermeneutically orientated conception I will concentrate on the formal aspects of metaphors, especially regarding the question wether or not there is any sort of resemblance between the form of metaphors and the objects they signify. It follows out of this that my re-definition of mimesis and metaphor will not focus on the relation between *mythos* and *mimesis* predominant in Ricoeur. On the contrary I shall concentrate on the world-creating aspects of metaphor which are said to arise from the mimetic potential of language (in Benjamin's ideal sense).

Despite this I will try to rethink the Benjaminian conception of "ideal language" in a more appropriate analytical way, using central ideas of the approach to a theory of symbols that Nelson Goodman suggested in his "Languages of Art" (Goodman 1976). Goodman states that metaphor involves the transfer of a schema (and the labels within that schema) between disjoint realms. (A schema applied to a realm makes up a system.) In metaphor a familiar scheme is implicitely applied to a new realm or to its old realm in a new way. Typically, the result is novel organization of the realm, for the metaphorical scheme classifies together objects in the realm that are not classified together by any literal scheme. (Goodman/Elgin 1988, 16) But let us challenge this Goodmanian theory of metaphor. We must keep in mind as a presupposition: Goodman states that resemblance between two objects *A* and *B* is no necessary or sufficient condition for representation in the sense that *A* represents *B*. An object resembles itself to a maximum degree but rarely represents itself. *A* must be a symbol for *B*, which means: stand for it, refer to it, as far as the matter of representation is concerned. According to this view denotation is at the very core of representation and is independent of resemblance. This denial of resemblance brings with it that the kind and the direction of the transfer of the schema are arbitrary: almost anything may stand for anything else, even and especially in the case of metaphor. According to Goodman even pictorial systems of signs lack the category of resemblance to some degree and against our intuitions. These intuitions derive primarily from the argument of natural language systems and pictorial symbol-systems having different perception conditions. While the words of a natural language must be learned through teaching and one cannot decide which signs are related to which objects when confronted with an unknown foreign language, the perception of pictorial systems is almost anthropologically universal. Leaving aside the question wether this is true or not we could try to imagine and put forth the crucial assumption: Is there any relation between the signs and the signified objects that is beyond convention and arbitrariness? Goodmans answer for representation as a whole is devastating; any hope for so called realistic features vanishes: "Realistic representation [...] depends not upon imitation or illusion or information but upon inculcation. [...] If representation is a matter of choice and correctness a matter of information, realism is a matter of habit." (Goodman 1976, 38) In the case of metaphor, however, one answer of the radical nominalist Goodman can be isolated that is a bit astonishing. In compliance with his nomialism Goodman states that in metaphor a schema can be transferred almost anywhere; this transfer is bound only to cultural, historical, i.e. conventional decisions and settings. "The choice of territory for invasion is arbitrary", as Goodman writes, "but" – and I think that is very crucial – "the operation within that territory is almost never completely so." (Goodman 1976, 74) Goodman continues with his example of the "deliberate application of temperature predicates to sounds or hues or personalities or to degrees of nearness to a correct answer; but *which* elements in the chosen realm are warm, or are warmer than others, is then very largely determinate. Even where a schema is imposed upon a most unlikely and uncongenial realm, antecedent practice channels the application of labels." (Goodman 1976, 74) It seems that Goodman leaves behind the concept of resemblance and turns to some kind of analogically structured relation between the label order within the transferred schema and the objects in the new realm. Admittedly the term analogy does not seem to play an important role in Goodman's "Languages of Art". But maybe the concept named with that term could be clarifying in the process of comprehending the phenomenon of metaphor. Let us turn back to the difference between pictorial symbol systems and the symbol systems of natural languages. One argument for the resemblance between pictures and what they represent is that we can – *cum grano salis* – understand new pictures while on the contrary we cannot understand new words for example in a foreign language. This assumption conflicts with the second one, which proves pictorial realism to be a matter of inculcation, according to which view pictures – like words – do not resemble their referents at all. I think Robert Schwartz (Schwartz 1997, 166–168) has outlined an interesting solution for this dilemma. He argues in the following manner: "Consider a system like standard Western music notation. Given only a suitable sampling of written notes (symbols) and taught to correlate them with sounds (referents), we might very well learn how the system works, 'how to go on.' Getting the idea of how the system works enables us to handle new symbols in the system not included among the teaching samples. Schwartz is not talking here about new combinations of previously learned notes, but of understanding

new, hitherto unheard individual notes. And this kind of learning can occur, it would seem, without our ever receiving explicit instruction concerning the structure of musical notation. Yet there is no reason to suppose that the written notes 'look like' or resemble the sounds they denote. Again, resemblance between symbol and referent seems hardly to play a role. Indeed, we can find examples of this sort of inductive semantic learning in natural language, too." The ability to understand brand new metaphors is one of the examples Schwartz gives for inductive learning: Our habits associated with the literal use of the word put sufficient constraints on metaphorical use that we can frequently intuit the semantic import of the metaphor the first time around, without being taught it specifically. Systematic correlation of the set of symbols with their referents does not depend in any obvious way on resemblance. This lack of resemblance entails that the system at use in metaphorical transfer is conventional. But Schwartz discriminates further: "Still, the symbols within a given system may not be arbitrary with respect to the other symbols in the system, for there may be sufficient regularity among the symbols, regularity in how they denote or describe, so that learning to use some provides adequate evidence for interpreting other members of the set." Words of natural languages in their literal use are relative to each other, while within metaphorical use the labels within the transferred schemas gain some systematic regularity among each other. This regularity, of course, is not a priori or non-conventional. The point is that, given the way the system works, with the correlations that have been established (and do exist), we can learn the semantic force of some members of the system through learning the semantics of others. Thus, arbitrariness is not a question of conventionality, but more a question of induction and learning. We see the assignment of symbol to referent as arbitrary when we can discover no pattern that enables us to project the semantic import of the symbol from knowledge of other symbols in the system. A symbol can be arbitrary then in the sense that it is a matter of convention or choice or not an a priori necessity that it denotes what it does, but this differs from saying that its interpretation is arbitrary in relation to the other symbols in the system. It does not in any way follow that if symbols do not resemble their referents, the symbols need be arbitrary in relation to each other in the way ordinary words such as 'cat,' 'shoe,' and 'ink' are.

But for further discussion it seems clarifying to turn to a conception which is at the very core of Goodman's "Languages of Art": exemplification which is regarded as a central mode of symbolizing in the arts. Goodman defines exemplification (Goodman 1976, 52–57) as a subclass of the converse of denotation: a label (or in the case of language: a predicate) denotes an object, and, roughly spoken, the denoted object exemplifies that label or predicate. The difference between denotation and exemplification is a matter of direction. Exemplification, however, coincides not with the converse of denotation but with a proper subclass of that converse: the subclass consisting of those cases in which what is denoted or posseses refers back as a sample to what denotes or is possessed. Exemplification is possession plus reference. Goodman gives the example of small swatches of cloth in a tailor's booklet. These function as samples, as symbols exemplifying certain properties. But a swatch does not exemplify all its properties. Goodman's concept of exemplication looks quite plausible when dealing with material objects, as they are individual and perceptible. The swatches in the tailor's book are signs which share their material and perceptible properties with the objects which they signify. In this case a naive conception of mimesis could be diagnosed: due to the material properties that it posseses and to which it refers the sample imitates the labels or predicates which denote that sample. But Goodman applies exemplification even to pictorial systems of signs – in conflict with his repudiation of resemblance between sign and object that I quoted above. Goodman goes even further and says that any predicate instantiation in a natural language may exemplify not only its perceptible properties but its syntactical and semantical classification features as well. Which predicates denote an instantiation of a predicate in natural languages? Not only those which focus on the perceptual qualities of the instantiation and not only those which focus on its syntactical classification features but also those which focus on its semantical classication features. In the light of the no-resemblance theory of representation this seems rather hard to swallow: Goodman's use of exemplification in that broad sense seems to be overstressing and weakening the concept of exemplification. Is this concept of exemplification coherent with a nominalistic, extensional view which tries to dispense with intensions? I am inclined to say no. And I think Monroe C. Beardsley has uttered a critique similar to mine, concentrating on pictorial systems of signs (Beardsley 1997, 43–66) – but let us look at Goodman's answer: "First he [i.e. Beardsley] is quite right in calling me to account for misapplying the term 'exemplification' in certain cases that amount only to instantiation. To say a picture is of a certain kind – say a Churchill-picture or a centaur-picture – is not to say that the picture exemplifies but only that it instantiates a label for, or possesses the property of being such a picture." (Goodman 1997, 68)

But, so my hypothesis: Would it not be possible to speak of self-exemplification in the case of many metaphors in poetry? Could it not be that these metaphors possess the quality of being metaphors and refer to their metaphorical status? In this way metaphors could turn out to be an exemplification of some linguistic potential inherent to natural languages (cf. Kants concept of hypotyposis). And could that kind of poetic reference (cf. Ricoeur's "split reference") not be characterized as mimesis based on linguistic mediality, on a mimesis without perceptual resemblance (and so meet the Benjaminian requirements)?

Currently it seems to me that two different types of mimesis should be assumed: one in any case of metaphor which I would like to call schema mimesis and one which occurs when poetry reflects upon its own linguistic mediality, which I would like to call self-referential mimesis or exemplificational mimesis.

The question to be put to schema mimesis: if metaphor provides a novel organization of the realm, to which it is applied – as the metaphorical scheme classifies together objects in the realm that are not classified together by any literal scheme – then: are that realm and the objects and their properties completely unstructured before being metaphorically represented? Or could one suppose that this realm must have some intrinsic order of objects and properties that resembles the order of the labels within the scheme transferred to it? In the latter case metaphor would expose something about the objects and the properties of the realm and therefore be a mimetic act. (I wonder if this has anything to do with diagrammatic iconicity.)

The question to be put to selfreferential mimesis: Would it not be possible to repudiate the answer of Goodman to Beardsley (cf. above) in the cases of some poetry that deals with ist own linguistic mediality? And would it not be possible to return to Goodman's original concept that some

utterances in a natural language may possess the property of being utterances of that type *and* refer to that possession? If yes, that would mean that these utterances exemplify their own linguistic mediality. In case of metaphors – and NB: we are in the field of poetry – one instantiation exemplifies metaphor as a whole. And if we take seriously Walter Benjamin's myth of an ideal language that evolves in poetry, then this exemplification could turn out to be a case of mimesis of the world in a self-referential way as supposed by radical constructivism. This modern, formally orientated reading of the concept of mimesis would perfectly match the Aristotelian definition of mimesis: not the result of a work of art but the process of world creation, natural or artistic, must resemble nature. It would, furthermore, match the Platonic definition of philosophical mimesis, which is self-referential and differs in that regard from poetical mimesis which is in Platon's view based upon an ordinary subject-object-relation.

What does this renewed conception of mimesis mean for a concept of metaphor, especially for metaphor in science? In Western science we see a historical shift toward the belief that analogy rather than generalized metaphor provides a basis for scientific inquiry. (Gentner/Jeziorsky 1993, 477) Despite this I tend to follow Thomas S. Kuhn's view that metaphors are fundamental to science, providing on occasions "an irreplaceable part of the linguistic machinery of a scientific theory," playing a role that is "constitutive of the theories they express, rather than merely exegetical". (Kuhn 1993, 538) This could imply that knowledge in science is strongly related to the linguistic means by which scientific theories are formulated. And this could further imply that poetry which refers to its own linguistic mediality could turn out to be a crucial sceptical challenge to knowledge based theories in science. "Und das", to speak with Rainer Maria Rilke, "ist viel."

References

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