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Metaphor's Tender Sympathies

RACHEL GENN

ABSTRACT

While investigating whether neuroscience or art best corroborates the experience of immersion or reverie, the author interviews herself about how her “artist self” inquires of her “scientist self” (and vice versa). She wonders how conceptual information refracted through these “selves”—via mechanisms such as metaphor—fosters collaboration between disciplines in an intrapersonal context. She asks how epistemic value derived from mistakes and indistinctness enrich this shared imaginative space, focusing on metaphor as a conduit between elements and disciplines. Using Kafka’s mole analogy, she follows intuition as an interdisciplinary heuristic to explore reverie and the creative act.

THE POWER OF INDISTINCTNESS

“I have become a metaphor; vivid and nebulous at the same time. Recommended” [1].

For a writer or artist, getting into a state of artistic reverie is precious partly because of its unpredictability. The ineffability of this state also makes it difficult to describe or research it empirically. Science is hard pressed to communicate the feeling of knowing that poetic language engenders because poetic language often relies on metaphor [2].

When writing about how artistic reverie feels, I must blur my knowledge of the neuroscience of attention and intrinsic motivation to protect my creative awareness from the effects of this knowledge on the process of writing [3]. Thus, writing about creative experience flips between description and anecdotalizing; it creates a flickering phenomenological bridge between epistemic islands.

Metaphors, like prettily lit bridges, can excite us long before their destinations are understood. Like metaphor, reverie stimulates “velocity and vividness, thus making connections that lie beyond the control of the conscious mind. Reverie can also reinforce the capacity to tolerate experiences of the unknown, since this is an established part of the artistic process” [4].

Both reverie and metaphor convert “everyday incidents into rich perceptions that might amount to a revolution in experience” [5]. In this respect, literary metaphor feels like a DNA sample of reverie: The imaginative “stuff” of it seems the same. Both seem to invite a merging with the perceiver, with metaphor being a diminutive example of the coupling of outer and inner worlds characteristic of reverie. I am reminded of a physical analogy from a lunch-time seminar at the Institute of Psychiatry in 2005, when the audience gasped to see heart stem cells in their petri dishes, each cell beating individually as the whole organ eventually would. To the extent that they share a function, perhaps metaphor and reverie are related in a similar way. Shakespeare scholar John Carey believes that metaphor’s power lies in its literary indistinctness because “the imagination has to keep ingeniously fabricating distinctness—or whatever approximation to distinctness it decides to settle for—out of indistinctness” [6]. Indistinctness is not antithetical to understanding.

The conceptual power of metaphors provides efficient and productive ways to interpret and explore natural phenomena and processes, allowing scientists and nonscientists to—sometimes cooperatively—explore abstract domains of knowledge and to contextualize and negotiate complex information [7]. Benjamin Smart described metaphor as “mind unfolding itself to mind” [8], which, as I am a scientist and artist, happens within me. It is from the crucible of “mutual involvement,” says Goethe, that all knowledge grows [9].

While “normative rules determine which answer, solution, decision or action is right, heuristic rules underlying metaphors are rules of thumb which typically yield reasonably accurate results, but do not define or constrain what is right” [10]. Metaphors not only are “after the fact” interpretative devices; they also allow us to explore possibilities rather than follow set rules, generating predictive fertility.

In the poem “Essay on What I Think About Most,” Anne Carson suggests that it is in its ability to highlight what is wrong that metaphor excels:

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Metaphors teach the mind
to enjoy error
and to learn
from the juxtaposition of what is and what is not the case
[11].

METAPHOR AND CONCEPTUAL “SLIPPABILITY”

Metaphors can be linguistic devices, but also conceptual aids that help develop patterns in analysis or that facilitate reinterpretation. However, there is a thin line between artistic license for better expression and distorting experience and meanings. The integrity of knowledge can be compromised when aesthetics overshadow actuality [12]. This is a line that can become blurred when straddling disciplines, so care must be taken.

To define creativity, cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter looked to the structure and function of concepts and concluded that making variations on a theme is the crux of creativity. What is imaginable is strongly influenced by what Hofstadter terms the internal structures of a concept. Much of what floats in the “implicosphere” around a given idea, he admits, is majestically nonverbalizable. It is the way that concepts slip into one another in nondeliberate ways, or what the concept “reaches out” to that which it is not, that can produce unexpected results. By imagining intermingling implicospheres and conceptual slippage, he says we are “extending our abilities to see farther into the space of possibilities surrounding what is” [13].

With the development of cognitive metaphor theory in the wake of Lakoff and Johnson [14], theories have tended to share the assumption that there is a metaphorical transfer from a more familiar domain to a domain we know less about. Blake scholar Mark Vernon characterizes imagination with help from Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, claiming: “Fancy rearranges what it already knows, more or less arbitrarily, often just for effect; whereas imagination synthesizes, makes, bridges the subjective and objective, and perceives the interior vitality of the world as well as its interconnecting exteriors” [15].

Locke called metaphor “the perfect cheat.” When Shylock will not give up his jewel for “a wilderness of monkeys,” we do not care to know exactly what he means. With imaginative effort, Carey says, we “feel the creator’s possessiveness”; the interpretation itself feels puckish [16]. I am certainly drawn to writing and conceptual art that has such prankishness at heart. Metaphors like reverie are perhaps best structurally adapted to contain and deal with the incongruent or odd.

INTUITION, CREATIVITY, AND KAFKA’S MOLE

In a letter to Max Brod, Kafka wrote:

“We burrow through ourselves like moles and emerge out of our vaults of sand all blackened and velvet haired, with our poor little red feet outstretched for tender sympathy” [17]. When I heard this from a friend, my intuition immediately clamored to put the considerable energy of analogy to its best explanatory use. It was not clear whether my intuitions were due to proper exercise of cognitive competencies, or if they

constituted cognitive illusions [18]. Therefore, whether I am entitled to accept them is debatable. Nevertheless, I will use this intuitive exercise to expose my artist and scientist selves.

I was struck by how many of the elements of the analogy represented my islets of knowledge and curiosity. My intuition bridged (as if via fiber-optic cables) these islets, and this bridge glowed with the promise of explaining the intuition it had enlivened. Hofstadter says: “Strange though it may sound, non-deliberate yet non-accidental slippage permeates our thought process and is, I believe, the very core of thinking . . . by non-accidental. I do not mean to imply it is deliberate. Sometimes it is non-accidental but comes straight out of our unconscious mind” [19].

My thinking inside the analogy contained both deliberate reflection and non-perceptual intuitive judgement, which chimed with Jenny Eden talking about her paintings: “There is a reverberation between past and future crossing over the present in my mind, and this could be the case for the painting, too” [20].

Uricchio shows us how our creative imagination may work during augmented reality, which, like metaphor, “allows people to contribute their own virtual assets to the system . . . producing a ‘generative friction’ between different experiential layers” [21].

Looking further into how narrative coheres in augmented reality, Uricchio points to Ginzburg’s work invoking hunting and divining. Despite their divergent epistemological stakes, says Uricchio, “these two traditions share such operations as analysis, comparison, and classification in their attempts to decipher. . . clues that give the unseen world its meanings.” Ginzburg notes that both “presuppose the minute investigation of even trifling matters, to discover the traces of events that could not be directly experienced by the observer. Excrement, tracks, hairs, feathers in one case; animals’ innards, drops of oil on the water, heavenly bodies, involuntary movements of the body, in the other” [22].

Reading the quote above, I feel the almost physical urge to explain and wonder if such compelling intuitive judgments hover somewhere between hunting and divining. Perhaps the role for metaphor—between intuition and science—is a conciliatory one.

As perhaps natural diviners, moles go blindly, making efforts without full sense of what lies before them. They continue in their drudgery unguided and are not put off—necessary conditions of creative reverie. Burrowing through ourselves like moles alludes to allowing ourselves to be in the dark about matters while we make efforts to discover something. This, incidentally, is a feature of the analyst’s reverie where the benefits of holding off the therapist’s desires and autocratic interpretations can lead to a deeper reading in the therapeutic setting.

Burrowing through ourselves further suggests an intermingling of selves, as well as the simultaneity of the subjective and the objective. Emerging through the vaults of sand (both battered and resplendent), the mole is the act of poesis—that which “produces or leads (a thing) into being” [23]. Thus, our work emerges with us. We are what we do.



Fig. 1. Can metaphor encapsulate what Miklós Szentkuthy calls “the experimental playfulness of nature?” (© Rachel Genn)

In “Black Gold,” anthropologist and artist Amanda Ravetz sees knowledge as compost and poesis as an active ingredient in artistic research that corresponds “with multispecies kinship, decomposition, layering, digestion and prodigious storying that feeds artistic knowledge making in different combinations and degrees in different places and times” [24], making it apparent that artistic research cannot easily accommodate straight-backed rigor. Nature can and should burst through into other disciplines and affect our approach to knowledge construction. In the numbered sections of *Towards the One and Only Metaphor*, Szentkuthy demonstrates his preference for a method of cataloguing which he sees as “mercurial, more chemical, a transplanting of mathematical formulae into literary style” (see Fig. 1).

Outstretched for tender sympathy, the poor little red feet are a conspicuous indication of sore effort in need of healing. They stick out waiting to be touched. The artist and writer Charlotte Salomon wrote often of things touching, and she captures the tender sympathy in “the sky silently kissing the earth” [25]. Sympathy is a feeling of pity or sense of compassion. Perhaps the sympathy needed is between objective and subjective, phenomenological and epistemological. I have advocated recently that fact and fiction should be forced to rely on each other’s mercy. When Charlotte Salomon wrote

in her inimitable font across her rendition of Michelangelo’s “Creation of Adam,” it said “Only by touching can greatness be achieved” [26]. I take this as the reaching that notably underlies all great works.

Spread mind theorist Riccardo Manzotti notes that if the boundaries of one’s consciousness are not limited to one’s body, the mind also is physically spread. Thus, we became the art we are exposed to. Art becomes a way to shape the real physical world and not simply a device to stimulate the beholder’s mental world. He says that subject and object are just different ways to address the process that fleshes out the world we are familiar with [27]. Canetti says of Kafka’s work “His actual art exists thus, in the concealment of distance” [28].

The future of creativity is manipulating indistinctness, creating bespoke distinctness. Metaphors thrum and may represent “the vibrating correspondences that reveal the very fabric or threads underlining the universe” [29]. I feel the concealment of distance in the metaphors I love, stretching to endure the discomfort of their effortless effortful position, allowing for incongruence in service to imagination. As scientist-artists, we should be more open to incorrectness and follow writer Kate Zambreno: “Maybe what’s needed is to write with the awareness of being wrong. Can one’s wrongness be a source of compassion?” [30].

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