Reading the Metaphors of Tree and Island in Kenneth Slessor, Judith Wright, and Dorothy Hewett

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There is little dispute over the role of context in metaphoric interpretation, yet opinion remains divided on the extent of the effects of bodily experience, cultural background, conscious choice, and cognitive processes on the poet. The personal nature of poetry makes a definitive determinant of metaphoric deployment elusive, so that metaphor has often been posited as something unconsciously constructed by poets: “as something inherited, something unexamined, something belonging to the cultural unconscious” (Punter 140–1). Contemporary theories of cognitive and cultural accounts of figurative language have helped to dispense this notion: few would now accept that metaphor serves as mere, unexamined ornament to literal language. The resulting theoretical cross-pollination garners growing support for the possibility that one theory may not fit every context and forces a reconsideration of the role of individual free will when choosing a metaphor: are metaphors, in fact, pre-determined by “hard-wired” or “culturally-directed” influences, or are they consciously chosen by the poet?

The trend toward an increasingly holistic approach to the study of figurative language has resulted in an exhaustive examination of the dominant claims for unconscious processing inherent in cognitive theories. Teng contends “that metaphors, as cross-domain mappings, are not just something computed in the heads of individuals, but can be directly realized in the coupling of the external settings that frame and sustain our activities” (68). 1 Teng’s contention is shared by Leezenberg who believes “there are good reasons for doubting the feasibility of a complete reduction of linguistic metaphor to purely cognitive processes, the most important one being the fact that languages constitute elaborate systems of conventions and intersubjective knowledge that cannot easily (or perhaps not at all) be reduced to individual cognition” (2). Ritchie questions the assertion that a “great many, if not all, abstract inferences are actually metaphorical versions of spatial inferences that are inherent in the topological structure of image-schemas” (Lakoff 216) 2 , and rejects the perceived immanence of cognitive processes in conceptual metaphors. Ritchie further concludes that

that the development, use and interpretation of metaphor often involves a combination of these processes (4).

Ritchie does believe, however, that a certain amount of rigidity is involved in “the function of metaphor in producing and reproducing social structure (including interpersonal relationships)” (4) due to the combined effects of context, bodily and cultural experiences, and cognitive processes.

Keeping Ritchie’s idea of metaphorical rigidity in mind, I propose a comparison of the metaphoric deployment of Trees in Kenneth Slessor’s “North Country” and “South Country,” and Judith Wright’s “For New England” in relation to embodiment, conceptualization and cultural influence, and an analysis of “consciously constructed” language in Wright’s “For New England” and Dorothy Hewett’s “Islands and Forests.”

Before attempting to compare the metaphors of Slessor, Wright and Hewett, one must first consider the cultural milieu in which their talents developed. Australian poetry had its earliest beginnings as a “colonial verse tradition concerned with justifying, and with particularizing, the act of white settlement” which saw a steady writerly appropriation of the land, either through depictions of a new “Eden,” or, as in the case of the poet Henry Kendall, assimilating “key elements of the Romantic heritage to celebrate the splendor and mystery of the bush” (Ackland 74–5). With the advent of the Bulletin in the 1890s, popular ballads such as “Waltzing Matilda” offered a predominantly masculine, secular Australia in which women were relegated to “complementary, passive or invisible” roles (Ackland 77–8). There were, however, opposing schools: poets John Shaw Neilson and Christopher Brennan pursued a modernist aesthetic, albeit by different routes, while the poetry of bohemians, Victor Daley and Hugh McCrae “was a precursor of the ‘Vision School’ which developed around Norman Lindsay in the 1920s” (Ackland 79–82).

By the time Kenneth Slessor published his best known work, “Five Bells,” in the 1930s, changes were under way. The “Australian poetic scene was riven by declamatory, rival groups” of which “the three most significant were the Jindyworobaks, the Angry Penguins and the radical student poets publishing in . . . Hermes” (Ackland 88). 4 Mounting hostilities between the three led to the Ern Malley hoax, which Ackland claims, freed “Australian verse from dogmatic models” and created “an environment in which eclectic talents could flourish” (90–1). Ackland’s claim must, however, be tempered against his further statement
that “well into the 1960s literary circles, no less than public bars, were men-only preserves, with women largely confined to the lounge-bar roles of polite applause and ego-flattering compliance” (97). Australian cultural preoccupations, therefore, remained intertwined with masculine and nationalistic sentiments, leading one to surmise that the writing experiences of Judith Wright and Dorothy Hewett would have differed vastly from Kenneth Slessor’s. Wallace-Crabbe contends that the “so-called ‘generation of ‘68’ would be aggressively masculine in its interests and groupings, as much so as any generation since the 1890s; but its floruit was paradoxically to coincide with the rise and rise of women’s fiction” (235). And so it was with Wright and Hewett: in the late 1960s, Wright produced some of her most authoritative works, establishing herself as an environmental and Indigenous rights activist, and Hewett came to prominence as a left-wing, feminist writer in the 1970s, whereas Slessor remained an often openly conservative, establishment poet.

In addition to the three poets’ diverse backgrounds were equally diverse styles: Slessor’s technical perfection and “fastidious sense of the concrete” (Smith 25), Wright’s often symbolic and always philosophic lyric (Walker, “Poetry of Judith Wright” ix-xiii), and Hewett’s sensitivities to both “the sanctity of nature” and the “mystique of the city” (Bennett 20–1). The metaphors of Tree and Island are an intersecting point in the poetic works of these three well-known Australian poets and offer an excellent opportunity to study the influences of bodily experience, cultural background, conscious choice, and cognitive processes on a poet’s choice of language.

Implicit in the theories of embodiment and conceptualization examined in this essay is the influence (and therefore constraint), upon the individual’s creative activities by bodily, cognitive, and cultural processes. Gibbs’s account posits bodily experience as the precursor to metaphor, because he believes “abstract concepts would not exist in the ways that they do in ordinary cognition without body-based metaphor” (122). Despite accepting that “metaphor is fundamental to conceptual processing . . .” and “abstract concepts are partly created from the metaphorical mapping of embodied source domains onto various target domains” he further suggests that “human conceptual processing is deeply grounded in embodied metaphor, especially in regard to abstract understandings of experience” (122).

One need only contemplate the opening stanza of Slessor’s “North Country” to discover a number of the body-based metaphors to which Gibbs refers:

North Country, filled with gesturing wood,
With trees that fence, like archer’s volleys,
The flanks of hidden valleys (ll. 1–3)

The human attribute of “gesturing”—a word commonly linked to communication—implies an attempted effort to impart a mood or emotional state. “Fence” and “archer’s volleys” create a contradictory image, at once hostile and yet suggestive of protection when followed by “flanks,” a word traditionally connoting an area susceptible to attack. In fact, the language throughout “North Country” is anthropomorphic with “trees like broken teeth” (l. 12), “trunks that lie grotesquely rigid/Like bodies blank and wretched” (ll. 14, 15) and branches “Dripping red with blood” (l. 29). The sustained use of embodied terms compels one to physically identify with the trees, and prompts a contemplation of the inherent violence and destruction caused by human progress.

Slessor’s anthropomorphization of trees supports Gibbs belief that “it is simply not an arbitrary fact of English that we talk about our lives and careers in terms of sources, paths, and goals; rather, we metaphorically conceptualize our experiences through very basic, bodily experiences in the world that are abstracted to form higher-level metaphoric thought” (92). Gibbs insists, too, that in the “indexical hypothesis” (205) one can find further evidence to support theories of embodiment:

three major steps occur when language is understood in context. First, words and phrases are indexed to objects in the environment or to perceptual symbols in long-term memory. Second, the affordance structures (i.e., the possible actions that can be done to an object by a person) are derived for each object in the situation. Third, the listener must combine or “mesh” the affordances according to the constraints on embodied possibilities in the real world (205–6).

An effective illustration of the meshing of affordances to which Gibbs refers occurs in the following lines of Wright’s “For New England”:

And I remember

The house closed in with sycamore and chestnut fighting the foreign wind (ll. 4–6)

There is, after all, nothing startling in the concept of a tree offering protection from, or fighting against, the wind. Both actions fall within the possible capabilities of real trees.

Gibbs’s account alerts one to the unconscious embodiment of language and offers a sound basis for revealing why certain linguistic associations are often constrained by bodily experiences. However, limiting poetic analysis to embodied language alone would result in a rather one-dimensional reading. It stands to reason that combining embodiment theory with conceptual processing, cultural influences, and conscious construction would surely produce a richer interpretation.

In Lakoff and Turner’s collaborative study, one finds some acknowledgement of the effects of both lived experience and cognitive processing. They maintain that

the source domains of many metaphors are typically understood without metaphor . . . We conventionally understand these concepts not by virtue of metaphorical mappings between them and different conceptual domains but rather by virtue of their grounding in what we take to be our forms of life, our habitual and routine bodily and social experiences (59).

They do not, however, admit to conscious constructions of metaphoric language. Rather, they propose that “a highly articulated version” of the Great Chain of Being “still exists as a contemporary unconscious cultural model indispensable to our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our language"
The Great Chain of Being consists of "higher and lower sublevels, so that dogs are higher order than insects, and trees higher than algae" (167) When one reads literature, "what is taken for granted . . . is that we have a certain sense of the order of things, that we know a great deal about man's place in the universe" (166). If one pauses to consider the choice of Tree in "North Country," one is immediately struck by the validity of Lakoff and Turner's argument. In the tree one has the highest order of plant life with all of its sacred life-giving connotations and obvious parallels with human physicality. The death of the trees would lose considerable force if shrubbery were used in their place. Therefore, Slessor's invocation of the schema surrounding the concept of Tree places the Tree as sentient being and man as murderous agent:

As if they've secret ways of dying here
And secret places for their anguish
When boughs at last relinquish
Their clench of blowing air— (ll. 17–20)

The choice of Tree in "For New England," likewise, is anything but arbitrary. The poem is, on one level, an address to the accepted "order of things," with Wright using the often recognizable native origins of trees to mark that order in Australia. The lines "Your trees, the homesick and the swarthy native/ blow all one way to me" (ll. 1–2) juxtapose cultural insights on colonial blindness with distinctly different images of Australians and Aborigines. Furthermore, Wright draws attention to the struggle to reconcile the postcolonial legacy of migrant:native/alienation:belonging binaries in the lines, "the house closed in with sycamore and chestnut" (l. 5) and "Therefore I find in me the double tree" (l. 10).

An important element of the Great Chain metaphor is the "single generic-level metaphor, GENERIC IS SPECIFIC, which maps a single specific-level schema onto an indefinitely large number of parallel specific-level schemas that all have the same generic-level structure as the source-domain structure" (Lakoff and Turner 162). There are fewer restrictions for metaphoric mapping, but constraints remain for metaphoric connections. One can track such constraints in the following lines of "South Country,"

And over the flat earth of empty farms
The monstrous continent of air floats back (ll. 9–10)

As Lakoff and Turner make clear, when one reads "monstrous continent" one will retain the attribute of oppressive scale and, in the case of Australia, emptiness, without imagining an actual body of land floating above them.

Where Slessor uses the "monstrous continent of air" to strengthen associations, Wright's utilization of the GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor is an imaginative attempt to bridge a conceptual gap. At the time "For New England" was written, there existed few strong associations to connect the realities of the Australian landscape to the "world of verse" (Smith, "Great Tree"). Wright creates new associations through cross-mapping the specific-level schema of native and imported trees onto the source-domain schema of Tree. Sustained references to native and imported trees are supported within the universal concept of Tree, so that a longed-for unity finds expression in the fusion of laburnum and dogwood in the following lines:

Wind, blow through me
till the nostalgic candles of laburnum
fuse with the dogwood in a single flame
to touch a fleeting these sapless memories. (ll. 36–39)

Cognitive accounts may prove that "a complex conceptual metaphor provides a succinct and powerful mental representation of observed or experienced conceptual connections, as well as a ready means for generating a public representation of these connections" (Ritchie 196), yet Steen, like Ritchie, remains cautious of confining an understanding of metaphor to cognition, because "many of the conceptual metaphors found by Lakoff and Johnson may be the conceptual repository of our cultural knowledge" (16). Although it cannot be denied, then, that cultural knowledge "is bound to have highly variable cognitive representations and effects at the level of individual minds" (Steen 16), neither can the influence of culture on an individual's conceptual framework be denied, nor simply categorized into a conceptual "THIS IS THAT" paradigm.

In Slessor's "South Country," the cultural influence on the poet proscribes the relatively straightforward metaphorical use of the Tree witnessed in "North Country." Instead, the culturally responsive strategy of the gradual absencing of trees in the first and second stanzas is indicative of Steen's "conceptual repository" at work:

After the whey-faced anonymity
Of the river-gums and scribbly-gums and bush,
After the rubbing and the hit of brush,
You come to the South Country.

As if the argument of trees were done,
The doubts and quarrelling, the plots and pains,
All ended by these clear and gliding planes
Like an abrupt solution. (ll. 1–8)

The presence of trees is reduced until there is nothing but the "flat earth of empty farms" (9). The flat emptiness of European possession below "rotting sunlight" (11) suggests a land in which abrupt solutions have instigated moral crisis. The absent trees are "metaphors for many inchoate and often unspeakable aspects of social nearness and distance" (Crocker 49), and stand for another lack in the landscape that does not, due to the implicit cultural knowledge of enforced colonization and Aboriginal deaths and displacements, need to be explicitly referenced:

While even the dwindled hills are small and bare,
As if rebellious, buried, pitiful,
Something below pushed up a knob of a skull,
Feeling its way to air. (ll. 17–20)

Slessor and Wright make similar choices of metaphor and concepts, despite Slessor's espousal of a largely technical approach to poetry "guided by considerations of form and experiment" (Wallace-Crabbe 378) and Wright's rejection of the "exploitative acquisition" of humanity apparent in the "over-appropriated and over-inscribed" natural image (Walker, "Vanishing Edens" 32). Such
similarities from two very different poets successfully highlight the restrictive elements cognitive theorists claim are inherent in conceptualization and embodied experience. Cognitive theories, however, are not as robust at assessing the implicit cultural material embedded within the “global metaphor” of a poem (Lakoff and Turner 146). As was demonstrated with “South Country,” taking cultural factors into account reminds one that the metaphoric “process is not a simple game of substitution, but rather a creative game where the . . . interplay of two disparate terms” can be “profound and revealing of important and deep cultural understandings” (Sapir 32).

Theories of embodiment and conceptualization can reveal previously neglected metaphoric connections; however, there remains a poetic conceit that appears to fall outside their reckoning: consciously-constructed acts. Ritchie proposes such an act be considered as “cognitive, in a thoroughly biological sense, and social, both in the sense that it is used in conversations and other communicative actions, and in the sense that interesting and effective metaphors are repeated, learned, reused and incorporated into the culture” (4). Within the consciously constructive acts of borrowed, repetitive and incorporated language, one may include intertextual, historical, and mythical references by the poet. Such inclusions substantiate Ritchie’s claim for a conscious construction of language by the individual. In such cases, the poet purposefully choosing referents from a knowledge-specific source and mapping them onto what may be considered a generic-source schema. The conscious decision to map a knowledge-specific source to a universally understood metaphor allows the poet to circumvent certain conceptual processes and embodied experiences, which in turn expands the conceptual possibilities of the generic-source schema of that metaphor. Due to the vast amount of residual connotations that may fall outside the same generic-level structure as the source-domain schema, there are considerably fewer constraints than even the largely unrestricted GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor enjoys.

It may appear that using terms such as “mapping from a knowledge specific-source to a generic-source schema” to describe conscious constructions strengthens claims for a cognitive account of language. However, using conceptual terms to describe the way in which literary, mythological, and historical references connect to and enrich other elements in a poetic work does not necessarily imply pre-existing cognitive process. One must not assume that “the rules for drawing maps are immutable in the nature of that which is being represented in the map” (Bateson and Bateson 21). It should be understood that the conceptual terms used in this section have been purposefully appropriated in this instance to describe the conscious inclusion of literary, mythological, or historical references that fall outside either “hard-wired” cognitive processes or embodied experience: inclusions apparent in the metaphorical deployment of Islands in Wright’s “For New England” and Hewett’s “Islands and Forests.”

In order to appreciate how the Island operates as a metaphor for alienation in “For New England” and “Islands and Forests,” it is necessary to first consider the concepts associated with an Island. Islands are often conceptualized as singular or exotic spaces of imprisonment, confinement, protection or isolation, making the choice of Island an eminently suitable metaphor for alienation and exile; a suitability thoroughly exploited by Wright and Hewett. The following lines from “For New England” may serve as an example:

Here I will stay, said she; be done with the black north, the harsh horizon rimmed with drought.—
Planted an island there and drew it round her.
Therefore I find in me the double tree. (ll. 7–10)

A double imprisonment is invoked: the “self as island” imprisoned within a foreign island. The double imprisonment of the mother causes an internal doubling in the child, manifesting as a yearning to both escape from, and belong to, Australia:

And therefore I, deserted on the wharves, have watched the ships fan out their web of streamers (thinking of how the lookout at the heads leaned out towards the dubious rims of sea to find a sail blown over like a message you are not forgotten),

But look, oh look, the Gothic tree’s on fire with blown galahs, and fuming with wild wings. (ll. 11–16)

Wright’s arrangement of an Island metaphor and her continuation of the “double” theme throughout the poem are mirrored in the stanza in which she references the Ulysses myth:

Where’s home Ulysses? Cuckolded by lewd time he never found again the girl he sailed from, but at his fireside met the island waiting and died there, twice a stranger. (ll. 32–35)

Wright’s addition of the Ulysses myth into a poem with an Australian setting draws attention to the plight of the exile. The knowledge specific to the Ulysses myth is mapped onto the mirrored terms, which in turn maps them onto the migrant experience, thereby offering a far greater depth and connotation to the exploration of alienation. This tempers the earlier longing to discover if there is anything beyond the “dubious rims of the sea” with an exile’s knowledge that one can neither leave home completely nor find unity if one returns.

Where Wright chooses a single myth to illuminate her themes, Hewett’s “Islands and Forests” consciously employs “the distancing techniques of fairytale and myth” to address alienation (Walker, “Vanishing Edens” 49). From Hewett’s opening stanza there is little doubt of the poet’s intention. The lines “Illyria has two weeping palaces/and a shipwrecked shore” (ll. 3–4) draw attention to the particular island of Illyria and assumes a fore-knowledge of its history, to symbolize an ongoing struggle for unification and independence from the imprisonment of colonization. References to The Tempest further extend the metaphorical content:

Caliban-Ferdinand-Prospero, the beast is exorcised, (ll. 14–15)

Hewett’s reference to Caliban offloads the postcolonial con-
notations within Shakespeare’s The Tempest, so that a contemplation of invasion and native disenfranchisement is initiated without explicit mention. Furthermore, associations to the traditional European literary canon:

Islands are magical rings,
round green circles of fire,
lions roar in the Forest of Arden,
asses bray in the midst summer woods.

We stand deprived in the dark. (ll. 19–23)

address not only the alienation at the heart of colonial experience, but more specifically the experience of many Australians. Australia stands outside the magical ring to which Hewett refers—it does not possess a “Forest Arden” or “midsummer woods.”

Although Hewett’s “Islands and Forests” overtly maps knowledge-specific sources to the schema of Island, the progression of her poem suffers in comparison to Wright’s. Hewett’s method is too self-conscious: her employment of myth and fairytale tends toward inflation and leads to “oversignification and confusion” (Walker, “Vanishing Edens” 57). The subtle interplay of literary convention, cultural saliency, and mythical reference in Wright’s poem works to greater effect. From this point of view, “For New England” and “Islands and Forests” are proof against the argument that conscious constructions may be deployed in a mechanical or derivative way to achieve universal appeal.

Notwithstanding whether one considers Wright and Hewett to have succeeded or failed in their respective aims, both poets map mythical and literary sources that must be learned and, therefore, fall outside either “hard-wired” cognitive process or personal embodied experience. The result is an enhancement of the layered meanings of the metaphor of Island, without the risk of interpretive failure inherent in a novel metaphor. One may conclude, then, that while the properties of an Island may fall within the paradigms of cognitive conceptualization, deployment of the metaphor is due to conscious choice rather than hard-wired concepts.

Cognitive accounts of conceptualization and embodied experience provide insight into metaphor and highlight the myriad constraints and assumptions that may contribute to rigidity in figurative language. Nonetheless, claims of metaphorical rigidity become problematic in any theoretical accounts that either assume the individual is incapable of overriding cognitive, bodily, or cultural constraints or lack any consideration of the linguistic network of associations regularly employed in literary works. There can be no doubt that metaphorical rigidity assists in producing and reproducing social structures—one need only consider Slessor’s and Wright’s choice of the Tree as a metaphor for Australian/Aboriginal relations. However, using the “right” metaphor, or making mechanically correct conceptual connections if you will, is not enough. For example, a reading that is inclusive of a combination of influences is more likely than a purely cognitive reading to uncover why Wallace-Crabbe rejects much of Slessor’s early work as the technical display of a “verbal dandy” (377)2, yet accepts “South Country” as the revelation of a “poet . . . shaping his experience” (385).

This study suggests that poetic texts reflect conscious decisions made within the constraints of metaphor, decisions which include the grouping or repetition of associative words, and the inclusion of literary, mythic, and historic references that may in turn map new schemas onto existing ones. But while a degree of rigidity is impossible to overcome, the argument that “metaphors are not always, if indeed ever, a matter of choice” because “we live within a continuing metaphorical structure and, furthermore, within a structure which largely determines what it might mean to be metaphorical” (Punter 80) cannot be applied without reservation to the context of poetry or, one might further hazard, to any creative literature. To do so, one must overlook the fact that aesthetically motivated texts are the result of deliberate and culturally inscribed lexical choices and, as such, offer readings that often exceed both authorial intention and metaphorical constraints.

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NOTES
1 Teng’s study is not directly concerned with poetic language; however, his approach and conclusions are in line with the current theoretical discussion in this paper. Teng compares Lakoff and Johnson’s ideas of “cross-domain mapping” and “embodied interaction with the world” (1980, 1999), and Gibbs’s (1999) idea that “metaphors can be off-loaded into the cultural world” to Fauconnier’s account of blending theory (2001) through “an analysis of how users of modern personal computers (PCs) negotiate a mouse-driven interface and the experience they undergo.” Teng concludes that “neural computing should be embedded in and appropriately coupled to the external structures that constrain and modulate what people do to and in the world” (83).
2 Lakoff believes that a “great many, if not all, abstract inferences are actually metaphorical versions of spatial inferences that are inherent in the topological structure of image-schemas” due to The Invariance Principle, wherein “metaphorical mappings preserve the cognitive topology . . . of the source domain, in a way consistent with the inherent structure of the target domain” (215).
3 Jennifer Strauss states in “Literary Culture 1914–1939: Battlers All” that the Vision school was “European-orientated enthusiasts for acculturating a neo-Hellenistic strain into the Antipodes” however their major claim to virtue is probably the nurturing of Kenneth Slessor, who co-edited Vision’s four issues (1923–1924) but in the event of his poetry . . . soon ceased to be typical of a style seen at its best in some gracefully accomplished lyrics from Hugh McCrae.” See The Oxford Literary History of Australia, 1998: 113.
4 The Angry Penguins were Adelaide/Melbourne based writers of the Modernist school; the Jindyworobaks were dedicated to assimilating Aboriginal language/culture within their poetry; the radical students publishing in Hermes were Sydney-based.
5 Bennett suggests Hewett’s “failure as a revolutionary, either of Marxism or for some versions of contemporary feminism may be her saving grace as a writer” Dorothy Hewett: Selected Critical Essays, 1995: 13. Lever, however, finds “some of her [Hewett’s] constrictions of woman as willing participant in her own oppression” and her break from the Communist party problematic for her feminist and political status Dorothy Hewett, 1995: 147.
The “indexical hypothesis” supports Gibbs’s claims; so, it is unfortunate that his example of the chair—“One may use it to sit on or hold off a snarling lion, however, it is not ordinarily meshed with the goal of propelling oneself across the room”—weakens his position. One could argue that an office chair (on wheels) could be used to propel oneself, and might therefore fall into an individual’s indexing of a Chair. This oversight proves, too, that any theory that imposes rigid boundaries on an individual’s ability to make language choices will necessarily be weakened in the process.

The basic Great Chain concerns the relation of human beings to ‘lower’ forms of existence. It is extremely widespread and occurs not only in Western culture but through a wide range of the world’s cultures. It is largely unconscious and so fundamental to our thinking that we barely notice it. The extended Great Chain concerns the relation of human beings to society, God, and the universe.” 167.

The following example clarifies specific-level and generic-level: “if we bring to bear the GREAT CHAIN METAPHOR . . . to understand the president in terms of the spider . . . We cannot, for example, understand that spiders are black, and black stands for sin, and therefore that ‘the president is a spider’ means that the president is sin, because that reading does not conform to the Maxim of Quantity. It fails to do so because spiders, being lower animals, have as their highest-order properties things like instinctive behavior, not physical properties like color. The Maxim of Quantity will thus guide us to use the instinctive behavior of the spider and not its color in understanding ‘The president is a spider’ (200–201).


The authors further state that “the poem as a whole can be read as giving larger and more general instructions. Those who read the poem in this way may, of course, differ on just what larger and more general instructions the poem is suggesting. But they are all attributing to the poem a global metaphorical structure . . .” (146).

This comment reveals how even the most imaginative language may often fail to impart the richness of meaning that experiential and cultural content can.

works cited


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