Metaphor and criticism

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Metaphor and Criticism

Many aestheticians observe that we often employ colourful figurative language in appreciative descriptions of artworks and natural objects. Kant writes that 'we call buildings or trees majestic and stately, or plains laughing and joyful; even colours are called innocent, modest, soft because they excite sensations containing something analogous to the consciousness of the state of mind produced by moral judgements.'[1] Frank Sibley notes that 'when we employ words as aesthetic terms we are often making and using metaphors':[2] we might describe 'a passage of music as chattering, carbonated, or gritty, a painter's colouring as vitreous, farinaceous, or effervescent, or a writer's style as glutinous, or abrasive.'[3] Many contributors to the literature on aesthetic description stemming from Sibley's paper have repeated or built upon this observation.

My aim in this paper is to answer the question: why do critics use metaphor so often in appreciative description? The prevalence of metaphor in criticism has sometimes been taken to reveal something important about aesthetic experience. Kant takes the kinds of descriptions he mentions to support his view that we experience the beautiful as a symbol of the morally good. Nelson Goodman argues that reflection on metaphorical descriptions of

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[1] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith and ed. Nicholas Walker (O.U.P., 2007), Ak. 5: 354.

[2] Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts,' in *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Essays on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (O.U.P., 2001), p. 2.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 2n2.

artworks reveals how artistic expression differs from forms of artistic representation such as depiction.[4] Roger Scruton holds that metaphors express an experience of perceiving-as, and that the frequent use of metaphor in aesthetic description therefore indicates that aesthetic experience is itself an experience of perceiving-as.[5]

My own approach to this question will be to consider what critics achieve by using metaphor. Whatever the use of metaphor in criticism reveals about aesthetic experience or other matters, it certainly reflects something about criticism. It enables critics to achieve what they are trying to achieve. What, then, are they trying to achieve? And what makes metaphor such an effective way of achieving it?

To answer these questions, we first need a good account of what metaphors communicate. I shall begin by outlining the account of metaphor I have defended elsewhere. I shall then defend my view against those who would deny that it applies to art-critical metaphors.

With this account in place, I shall then draw a distinction between two kinds of art-critical metaphor. This distinction has not, to my knowledge, been previously recognized; but drawing it is essential to understanding the function of metaphor in criticism. I shall then provide my account of what metaphor enables critics to achieve and of why it is so well-suited to achieving it.

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[4] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2nd Edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), ch. 2.

[5] See Roger Scruton, *Art and Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1974).

The Minimal Thesis

I have defended an account of metaphor I call the 'Minimal Thesis.'[6] This view is, I have argued, modest enough to be broadly consistent with many major theories of metaphor; and I have defended it against objections to other accounts of metaphor that also apply to it.

The Minimal Thesis is a claim about what someone who understands a metaphor is given to understand. It is neutral about whether what such a person is given to understand is speaker's meaning, semantic content, what is said, what is conversationally implicated, what she is made to notice, etc. It is not a claim about whether what she is given to understand is the meaning or content of the metaphor. It is therefore not an answer to many of the questions to which many of the best-known claims about metaphor, such as simile theories, Max Black's interaction theory, Davidson's denial that metaphors have a meaning other than the literal meaning of the words of the sentence, etc., are answers. This is what makes the thesis minimal.

To state the Minimal Thesis, I must make a distinction between two kinds of property. I call *likenesses* such properties as *being like this tomato* and *being like a cow*. I call *likeness-makers* for a certain likeness properties that give something that likeness. If this tomato is red, then *redness* is a likeness-maker for the likeness, *being like this tomato*. Sometimes, when we speak of 'the likenesses' or 'the similarities' that there are between two objects, we are talking about the properties that make them alike – that is, the likeness-makers. But I am not using the word 'likeness' in this way.

[6] See [reference removed for blind review].

I call the expression(s) in the metaphor that are used metaphorically 'the metaphorical element(s)' of the metaphor. For example, the word 'sun' is used metaphorically in 'Juliet is the sun'. I call what is characterized with the metaphorical element the 'subject' of the metaphor. Juliet is characterized with the word 'sun,' and so she is the subject.

It may be that some metaphors do not characterize anything as having certain properties. For example, one might want to say that retorting, 'Juliet is not the sun', does not characterize Juliet as having any properties, but merely denies that Juliet has the properties Romeo characterized her as having. So too, one might want to say that metaphors in the antecedent or the consequent of a conditional do not characterize anything. If this is what we should say about these cases, I can accept it. My claim is about metaphors that characterize something as having certain properties.

The Minimal Thesis is this claim:

> With certain exceptions (discussed below), each property a metaphor's subject is characterized with the metaphorical element as having is either (i) a likeness indicated by the metaphorical element or (ii) a likeness-maker for a likeness indicated by the metaphorical element.

For short, I shall say 'the properties the metaphor attributes to its subject' instead of 'the properties the metaphor's subject is characterized as having with the metaphorical element'. To understand a metaphor that attributes properties, you must know what at least some of the properties are that it attributes to its subject.

The metaphorical element indicates a likeness at least partly in virtue of its non-metaphorical meaning. For example, 'sun' in Romeo's metaphor indicates the likeness, *being like the sun*, at least partly in virtue of its non-metaphorical meaning. Note also that the Minimal Thesis, being a disjunctive claim, leaves it open whether every metaphor that attributes properties attributes a likeness. It may be that the properties attributed by certain metaphors are all likeness-*makers* for a likeness indicated by the metaphorical element, and the likeness itself is not among the properties attributed.

I have claimed that it is the metaphorical element that indicates what the relevant likeness is. But I have not taken a position on the important question of what determines which likeness-makers for the likeness are attributed by a metaphor. It is obvious, however, that no metaphor attributes *every* likeness-maker for the relevant likeness. Romeo does not attribute to Juliet every property the sun has. The Minimal Thesis is also neutral about whether any metaphors attribute properties that cannot be attributed without metaphor.[7]

The exceptions alluded to in the statement of the Minimal Thesis are as follows:

(i) Sometimes, metaphors attribute properties that make the subject *unlike* what is indicated by the metaphorical element. 'No man is an island' is an example.

[7] On independent grounds, I have criticized arguments offered in support of the view that we use some metaphors to communicate what cannot be communicated without metaphor. See [reference removed for blind review].

(ii) Sometimes, properties the possession of which is a way of possessing a likeness-maker (for example, determinates of determinable likeness-makers) are among the properties the metaphor attributes. 'Sally is a block of ice' attributes emotional unresponsiveness to Sally. *Unresponsiveness* is a likeness-maker for the likeness, *being like a block of ice* (physical rigidity being a kind of unresponsiveness). And being emotionally unresponsive is a way of being unresponsive. But *emotional unresponsiveness* is not itself a likeness-maker for the likeness, *being like a block of ice*.

(iii) Sometimes, properties merely believed to be, or imagined as being, likeness-makers for a certain likeness are among the properties the metaphor attributes. 'Bert is a gorilla' can attribute aggressiveness to Bert, even though gorillas, despite popular misconception, are not aggressive.

(iv) Sometimes, a metaphor communicates that the subject has likeness-makers of a certain kind *K*, but does not communicate, for any property *Φ*ness that is (believed or imagined to be) a likeness-maker for the likeness, that the subject is *Φ*. To understand certain metaphorical uses of 'The forms in every Kandinsky are alive with movement,' you must grasp that the forms in every Kandinsky have properties making them *look* like something alive with movement. You must grasp that they have likeness-making properties that are features of their visual appearance. But this metaphor does not tell us what likeness-makers these are.

All of these cases are, of course, intelligibly related to the central case in which likeness-makers for a likeness indicated by the metaphorical element are attributed.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that, sometimes, a metaphor is also an example of another way of extending the use of an expression. For example, the same expression may be simultaneously used both metaphorically and by causal analogy. Aristotle's examples of 'healthy food' and 'healthy urine' are cases of causal analogies: healthy food is such as to cause, contribute to, or maintain health, and healthy urine is caused by health.[8] Many expressions are simultaneously used both metaphorically and by causal analogy. For example, when we characterize a pain with the word 'sharp,' we do not attribute to it the property of being like something sharp. Rather, sharp pains are like pains caused by sharp things.

What the Critic is Communicating

If the Minimal Thesis is correct, then critics using metaphor (at least in the central case) attribute likenesses indicated by the metaphorical element and/or likeness-makers for those likenesses. If a critic describes music metaphorically as 'chattering,' then she gives us to understand that (1) the music is like something chattering, and/or that (2) the music is *F*, *G*, *H*, etc. Here, *F*ness, *G*ness, *H*ness, etc. will be properties that would make the music like something chattering.

However, views inconsistent with the Minimal Thesis are common in aesthetics. Some aestheticians think that, in criticism, metaphors are not used to attribute any property to the object – even if they are so used elsewhere. *A*

[8] See Aristotle, *Topics*, in Vol. I, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. W. A. Pickard-Cambridge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 106b.

fortiori, they are not used to attribute likenesses or likeness-makers. I shall call this view 'anti-realism about metaphor.'

Many aestheticians claim that the fact that aesthetic terms are often metaphorical lends support to an anti-realist understanding of aesthetic terms in general. John Bender says that one thing that makes it difficult to argue that aesthetic properties are real is that many of them are 'metaphorical,'[9] by which he presumably means that (apparent) ascriptions of these properties are often metaphorical. So too, Sibley writes:

> I include [among aesthetic descriptions], moreover, those remarks, metaphorical in character, which we might describe as *apt* rather than *true*, for these often say, only more strikingly, what could be said in less colourful language. The transition from true to apt description is a gradual one.[10]

In the same paper, Sibley also says that he is posing the question of objectivity in aesthetics as a question about the truth and aptness of remarks, rather than as a question about the possession of properties by objects. One thing that leads him to do this is the existence of metaphorical aesthetic descriptions. He explains:

> while we might replace the question 'Is she graceful?' by talk of properties, we might feel less happy, with metaphorical remarks, saying that a work has the *property* of gemlike fire or marmoreal

[9] John W. Bender, 'Aesthetic Realism 2,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (O.U.P., 2003), p. 80.

[10] Frank Sibley, 'Objectivity and Aesthetics,' in *Approach to Aesthetics*, p. 71.

hardness (though we might say it has properties that make these descriptions apt).[11]

In a later paper, Sibley says straight out that figurative descriptions 'are apt rather than true.'[12]

These remarks suggest that Sibley endorses anti-realism about metaphor. It is a familiar claim that what we *say* with metaphor is, normally, not true. But if Sibley held only that a metaphor-user does not normally say, but may communicate, something true, he would be unlikely to describe this as the view that metaphors are 'apt rather than true.' Indeed, this formulation seems to have been chosen in order to exclude the possibility that apt metaphors are apt *because* they communicate something true. Similarly, if Sibley believed only that metaphors are not used to attribute the property the object is *said* to have, though they are used to attribute properties, he would be unlikely to cite the existence of metaphorical aesthetic remarks as a reason for eschewing *all* talk of properties in favour of talk of the aptness of remarks. So I take it that, although Sibley wrote little on metaphor, he was an anti-realist about metaphor.

However, the reasons given in Sibley's (admittedly cursory) discussion are bad reasons to embrace anti-realism. He says that 'we might describe [metaphorical aesthetic descriptions] as *apt* rather than *true*, for these often say, only more strikingly, what could be said in less colourful language.' But the fact that we could say something in language less colourful than the

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

[12] Frank Sibley, 'Making Music Our Own,' in *Approach to Aesthetics*, p. 152.

language we actually use is, of course, no reason at all to believe that our actual remark is apt *rather than* true. A remark's colourfulness has nothing to do with its truth.

Similarly, although it is perhaps true that 'we might feel less happy, with metaphorical remarks, saying that a work has the *property* of gemlike fire or marmoreal hardness,' that is no reason to doubt that *some* property is being attributed. It is just that we cannot be attributing the property we would have been attributing had we been speaking literally – which should come as no surprise, since we are not speaking literally. We would be equally unhappy saying that a brave person has the property of being a lion. That, however, is no reason to doubt that we attribute bravery to the person when we describe her metaphorically as 'a lion.'

So the considerations Sibley advances do not provide good reasons to endorse anti-realism about metaphor. The most developed and influential argument for anti-realism about art-critical metaphors is provided by Scruton. According to Scruton, a metaphor 'attributes no property at all' to the work.[13] Rather, we use art-critical metaphors 'to describe something other than the material world,' namely, 'how the world *seems*, from the point of view of the active imagination.'[14]

Scruton holds that an expression used metaphorically means exactly what it would mean if used literally. When we say metaphorically, 'The music

[13] Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (O.U.P., 1997), p. 154.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

is sad,' 'sad' means exactly what it would mean if we were speaking literally. Clearly, however, we are not attributing literal sadness to the music.

It follows, Scruton thinks, that we are not attributing any other property to it, either. 'To say that the word ascribes, in this use, another property, is to say that it has another sense – in other words that it is not used metaphorically but ambiguously.'[15] So we claim that we are attributing another property to music on pain of denying that expressions used metaphorically have the same sense as they would have if used literally. But that is unacceptable. 'It follows that the word 'sad' attributes to the music neither the property that is possessed by sad people, nor any other property. It therefore attributes no property at all.'[16]

There are several problems with Scruton's position. First, it is false that 'To say that the word ascribes, in this use, another property, is to say that it has another sense.' The same predicate can be used in the same sense to attribute different properties on different occasions. You do not have to use a word in a different sense to attribute a different property.

A parallel will illustrate this. By parity of reasoning, we could use Scruton's assumptions to show that a speaker who describes someone sarcastically as 'friendly' is not attributing unfriendliness to her – or, indeed, any property at all. For clearly, 'friendly' used sarcastically means what it means when used literally. Equally clearly, the speaker does not believe that the person described is friendly. So she is not attributing friendliness to her.

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[15] *Ibid.*, p. 154.

[16] *Ibid.*

Nor is she attributing any other property. To hold that she is would commit one to the claim that 'friendly' is ambiguous. Indeed, one would have to say that one meaning of 'friendly' is 'unfriendly,' which is absurd. Therefore, you attribute no property at all when you describe someone sarcastically as 'friendly.'

Obviously, this argument is faulty. The sarcastic person is attributing unfriendliness to the person she describes. But she is not using any word in a different sense than she would be if she were speaking non-sarcastically. She is attributing unfriendliness by other means.

Scruton might reply that, even though it is *possible* to use a word in its usual sense to attribute a property that is not attributed when we use it in this sense and speak literally, in order to show that this is actually the case with 'sad' as applied to music, we must identify some plausible candidate for a property that is being attributed here. And this, he may claim, we cannot do. But even if this is true of the notoriously puzzling example of 'sad music,' it is not true of a vast range of other art-critical metaphors. In these cases, there are very plausible candidates for properties that are being attributed. If his case rests on this example, he does not have adequate support for his conclusion.

For example, Frederick Hartt describes Christ's head in a crucifix by Coppo di Marcovaldo in this way:

> The closed eyes are treated as two fierce, dark, hooked slashes, the pale mouth quivers against the sweat-soaked locks of the beard, the hair writhes like snakes against the tormented body.[17]

Take the metaphor of the locks of hair as 'writhing.' You need only look at the painting to see how plausible it is that Hartt, by using this metaphor, is attributing to the locks the property of *being like writhing snakes*. So too, connoisseurs of Chinese jades have long distinguished between the colours of 'spinach,' 'lychee-flesh,' and 'mutton-fat' jade, among many other kinds.[18] These metaphors, it seems evident, attribute shades of colour that make the different kinds of jade like these substances. There are many examples of art-critical metaphors for which there are plausible candidates for the properties being attributed.

Finally, suppose one showed that neither a likeness to sad people nor a likeness-maker for this likeness is attributed to music with expressive terms such as 'sad.' This would challenge my view if 'sad' as applied to music is used metaphorically with the sense it has when literally applied to sad people (and not used metaphorically with, say, the sense it has when literally applied to sad gestures or sad feelings).

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[17] Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 3rd Edition (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 43.

[18] See Craig Clunas, 'Jade Carvers and Their Customers in Ming China,' *The Bulletin of the Friends of Jade* 6 (1989), p. 36; Angus Forsyth and Brian McElney, *Jades from China* (Bath: The Museum of East Asian Art, 1994), pp. 38-9, 304, 354-355.

But, first, it is far from obvious that 'sad' is here used metaphorically with the sense it has when applied to sad people. If 'sad' is applied metaphorically to music, and has the same sense as it does when applied literally to people, applying it to music would be an example of personification. We personify the weeping willow when we describe it as 'sad.' But we do not appear to be personifying music when we speak of 'sad music.' That suggests that 'sad' is not used metaphorically with the sense it has when applied literally to sad people.

Second, it is not obvious that 'sad music' is a metaphor at all. Several philosophers, at least, have doubted it.[19] It is certainly not as obviously metaphorical as 'The weeping willow is sad.' Indeed, to assume that expressive terms are metaphorical is to assume that various theories of artistic expression are false. Philosophers often introduce the claim that expressive terms are metaphorical as though this assumption begs no relevant questions. But this is not so. If a certain version of the arousal theory of expression (to take one example) is correct, then to call music 'sad' is to say that it is such as to cause sadness. In that case, 'sad' is being used only as a causal analogy, like 'healthy' as applied to food: as I mentioned above, we attribute, not health, but the property of being such as to cause, contribute to, or maintain health when we call food 'healthy.' And if we are using 'sad' only as a causal analogy, then we are not using it metaphorically. 'Healthy food' is no

[19] See, for example, R. A. Sharpe, *Philosophy of Music: An Introduction* (Chesham: Acumen, 2004), pp. 102-108; Paul Boghossian, 'Explaining Musical Experience,' in *Philosophers on Music: Experience, Meaning, and Work*, ed. Kathleen Stock (O.U.P., 2007), p. 123.

metaphor (not even a dead one). Expressive terms are clearly metaphors only if a range of theories of artistic expression are clearly false.

So the possibility that expressive terms do not attribute likenesses or likeness-makers should not trouble a supporter of the Minimal Thesis. For if that is so, one could justifiably conclude that expressive terms are not used metaphorically after all. There are independent grounds for hesitating to regard them as metaphors anyway. Numerous clear examples of metaphor *are* used to attribute likenesses and/or likeness-makers.

I conclude that these arguments do not show that the Minimal Thesis fails to apply to art-critical metaphors. Anti-realism about art-critical metaphors, widespread as it is in aesthetics, is an obstacle to understanding why critics frequently use metaphor. However, before explaining why they do, there are two very important clarifications of my position that need to be made.

First, my claim is only that art-critical metaphors attribute likenesses and/or likeness-makers (or the properties identified in exceptions (i)-(iv)). This does not necessarily establish that such metaphors attribute *aesthetic* properties. That depends on what aesthetic properties are. Realism about aesthetic metaphor may not be sufficient to establish realism about aesthetic properties.

This is important because Scruton, for one, wants to establish anti-realism about metaphor partly because he wants to establish anti-realism about aesthetic properties. The assumption seems to be that, if these metaphors are used to attribute any properties, they are used to attribute

aesthetic properties. That assumption is not obviously correct. It depends, again, on what aesthetic properties are. If the likenesses and likeness-makers attributed with aesthetic metaphors are not themselves aesthetic properties, then an aesthetic anti-realist can happily accept the Minimal Thesis. Anti-realism about aesthetic metaphor may not be necessary to establish anti-realism about aesthetic properties.

Second, the aesthetic realist can also accept the Minimal Thesis, even if the likenesses and likeness-makers attributed by art-critical metaphors are not themselves aesthetic properties. It is consistent with my position to say that we attribute properties *in addition to* likenesses and likeness-makers when we use some particular metaphor. Critics may often imply, for example, that the work is important and interesting in virtue of having the likenesses or likeness-makers they attribute. If they do attribute such properties, however, then they do not do so in virtue of using a metaphor, but in virtue of something else (e.g., contextual factors).

Acceptance of the Minimal Thesis, then, does not by itself commit one either to aesthetic realism or to aesthetic anti-realism.

What the Critic is Interested In

So much, then, for what the critic communicates. A further important point is this. To say that critics attribute likeness-makers for a certain likeness is not to imply that the critic is always interested in the fact that those properties make the object have that likeness. Sometimes, the critic is indeed interested in those properties because they give the object the likeness.

However, sometimes she is interested in these properties, but not for this reason. Some examples will make this clear.

The critic is often interested in the fact that certain properties give the work a certain likeness. Hartt's metaphor of the locks of hair 'writhing like snakes' is an example. Hartt is explaining how the details of the picture combine to produce 'a total effect of the greatest expressive power.'[20] A certain shape – call it *S* – gives the locks of hair this likeness. The fact that the locks of hair have *S* does not, by itself, help explain the work's expressive power. But the fact that *S* makes the locks like writhing snakes does help explain this, for writhing snakes are full of tension, energy, etc.

Another example is Bernini's colonnade around St Peter's Square. This has been compared to a pair of arms embracing the pilgrims. The fact that the colonnade's shape makes it resemble a pair of embracing arms is of interest. The colonnade itself expresses welcome by resembling arms that do.

This is not to say that the critic is only interested in the fact that the locks of hair are like writhing snakes, or in the fact that the colonnade is like a pair of embracing arms. The critic is interested in the fact that *S* makes the locks like writhing snakes. This is an importantly different fact. If a different shape had made the locks like writhing snakes, the work might be less powerfully expressive. The likeness-making property, and not *merely* the likeness, is of interest here. It is just that one reason why the likeness-making property is of interest is that it gives the work that likeness. By giving the work that likeness, it helps make it powerfully expressive.

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[20] Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, p. 43.

Sometimes, by contrast, the likeness-makers are of interest, but not because they give the work the likeness. Victor Hugo says of *Hamlet*:

> In this tragedy … everything floats, hesitates, delays, staggers, becomes discomposed, scatters, and is dispersed. Thought is a cloud, will is a vapour, resolution a crepuscule; the action blows each moment in an inverse direction, man is governed by the winds.[21]

Take the metaphor, 'will is a vapour.' Hugo is interested in the fact that Hamlet's will has certain properties. These properties make his will like a vapour. However, Hugo is not interested in these properties *because* they make his will like a vapour. The likeness to a vapour does not have the sort of importance here that the likeness of the locks to writhing snakes has in Coppo's crucifix.

Another example is art historians' description of the drapery in late fifth-century Greek vase-painting as being drawn in 'the spaghetti style.'[22] As Figure 1 shows, this description is used because there are many lines of drapery-folds drawn close together, making the drapery resemble spaghetti. The critic is not interested in the fact that the drapery resembles spaghetti. It is hard to imagine what relevance that could have to the appreciation of ancient Greek vase-paintings. Rather, her interest is in a certain way of looking, which makes the drapery look like spaghetti.

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[21] Victor-Marie Hugo, excerpt from *William Shakespeare*, in *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Bate, trans. A. Baillot (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 350.

[22] Whether or not the phrase 'the spaghetti style' is itself a metaphor, one could certainly communicate the same thing by describing the drapery as 'spaghetti.'

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1. Red-figured squat oil- or perfume-jar (lekythos), in the style of the Meidias Painter. 420-400 B.C. Detail. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

I should mention a significant sub-class of this second kind of metaphor. Frequently, when the critic is interested in the likeness-maker, but not because it gives the object the likeness, the likeness-maker is the property of being such as to provide an experience, or elicit a response, of a certain kind. Keith Miller describes Alan Hollinghurst's novel *The Line of Beauty* in this way:

> Faintly perfumed and of fractal complexity, Hollinghurst's prose endows Nick with a rounded, ironical inner life. [23]

The prose is like something faintly perfumed in a key respect: it provides an experience of a certain kind, which something faintly perfumed also provides.[24] The property of being such as to provide that kind of experience is the likeness-maker attributed to the prose. That it provides this kind of experience is of greater interest here than the fact that it is like something faintly perfumed in virtue of doing so. Metaphors that tell us the kind of experience a thing provides loom large in certain kinds of criticism.

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[23] Keith Miller, 'People who can't love people,' *The Times Literary Supplement*, 9 June 2006, p. 22.

[24] It would not be to the point here to object that smelling something faintly perfumed and reading Hollinghurst are experiences of very different kinds. The point is that the experiences are in some respects alike, not that they are alike in every respect.

Why Critics Use Metaphor

We are now in a position to explain why critics so often use metaphor.

(a) When the Likeness is of Interest

First consider the cases in which critics are interested in the fact that the likeness-makers give the subject the likeness. Why are they interested in this fact? I suggest that it is because appreciation of the work involves perceiving or recognizing that these properties give it that likeness. Consider the examples above. Aesthetically appreciating Bernini's colonnade can partly consist in perceiving that the shape makes it like a pair of embracing arms. Appreciating Coppo's painting can partly consist in perceiving that the shape of the locks of hair makes them like writhing snakes. I do not mean that someone who failed to perceive these things would not count as appreciating these works. It is not that appreciation *must* partly consist in this. But appreciation can partly consist in perceiving these things. And that is plainly why the critic is communicating that these things are the case.

This suggests a partial explanation of metaphor's prevalence in criticism. When critics, in describing a work, give us to understand that *p*, this is often because appreciation of the work can involve perceiving or recognizing that *p*. Appreciation, in turn, often can involve perceiving or recognizing that certain properties give something a certain likeness.[25] By using metaphor, critics can give us to understand that certain properties give

[25] Hereafter, for the sake of brevity, I shall drop 'perceiving or recognizing' and speak only of perceiving.

something a certain likeness. That is one reason why metaphor is so common in criticism.

If anything needs defending in this explanation, I assume it is the claim that appreciation often involves perceiving that certain properties give something a certain likeness. Fortunately, there is a great deal of evidence that this is so.

Allusions are a very large class of examples. Appreciating Eliot's lines that begin a description of a woman in an unhappy marriage,

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,

Glowed on the marble…,[26]

involves recognizing that their wording makes them like the beginning of Enobarbus's description of Cleopatra when she first meets Antony:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne

Burned on the water….[27]

The evidence is not limited to allusions. Henry James's short novel *The Aspern Papers* is about the narrator's efforts to get the unpublished letters of a famous poet from an old woman and her niece. At one point, the narrator meets the niece in her garden and attempts to break down her resistance to relinquishing the papers. It has been pointed out that this scene is like the

[26] T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 56, ll. 77-78.

[27] William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. Michael Neill (O.U.P., 1994), 2.2.198-199.

temptation of Eve by the serpent in the garden of Eden. Appreciating the story involves recognizing this.

Discussing Raphael's cartoon for the tapestry, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, Kenneth Clark comments that the figure of 'Zebedee … is intended to recall an antique river god….'[28] In some Greek temples, a sculpture of a reclining figure was placed at either end of the line of figures in the temple's pediments. This figure was sometimes identified as a river god. An example showing what Clark means is reproduced in Figure 2, and Raphael's depiction of Zebedee, seated in a fishing boat in the same position, is given in Figure 3.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Figure 2. Raphael, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, 1515-1516. Bodycolour on paper laid into canvas. Detail. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Figure 3. Figure A from the west pediment of the Parthenon. 447-432 B.C. British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

Appreciation does not only involve perceiving likenesses the artist intends for the audience to perceive that the object has. John Beazley, discussing the development of ancient Greek Panathenaic prize amphorae, vases given as prizes to the victors in athletic contests, remarks:

> The Burgon vase is stout and squat; let us compare it with some later Panathenaics…. In London B 134, by the Euphiletos Painter, about 530, the neck is shorter, the body longer, and the whole vase gives a deeper

[28] Kenneth Clark, 'Raphael: *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*,' in *Looking at Pictures* (London: John Murray, 1960), p. 64.

impression of collected power. In London B 133, by the Eucharides Painter, about 480, the shape is even stronger and more compact….[29]

The Burgon vase is shown in Figure 4 alongside London B 133 in Figure 5. One can see why the later vase gives a deeper impression of collected power, and why the shapes of later vases are described as 'stronger.' The later vases are more like a taut, strong human body than the 'stout and squat' Burgon vase is. Seeing that the shape makes it like certain strong things is involved in appreciating it. The later vase gives a deeper impression of collected power in virtue of the shape giving it this likeness, whether this was intended or not. These likenesses are especially relevant, given the function of these vases as prizes for athletes.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

Figure 4. Attic black-figure Panathenaic amphora. Attributed to the Burgon Group. Ca. 565-560 B.C. British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

Figure 5. Attic black-figure Panathenaic amphora. Attributed to the Eucharides Painter. Ca. 500-490 B.C. British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

I conclude that we can be confident in the partial explanation I have provided of the prevalence of metaphor in criticism. Appreciation frequently can involve perceiving that certain properties give something a certain likeness. I turn now to cases in which appreciation does not involve perceiving that the likeness-makers attributed by a metaphor give the subject the likeness indicated by the metaporical element.

[29] John Beazley, *The Development of Attic Black-Figure* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 82.

(b) When the Likeness is not of Interest

I said above that metaphors in this class include both cases in which the attributed likeness-maker is the property of providing an experience of a certain kind, and cases in which it is not. Let us first take cases in which it is not.

In the previous explanation, I said that critics often give us to understand that *p*, in describing a work, because appreciation of the work can involve perceiving that *p*. This generalization about criticism also enables us to explain why critics attribute these likeness-makers. In these cases, appreciation can involve perceiving that the subject of the metaphor has the likeness-maker attributed. Appreciating Greek vase-paintings in the spaghetti style involves perceiving that the drapery-folds are painted in a certain pattern. But it would be ridiculous to suppose that appreciation of them can partly consist in perceiving that this pattern makes the drapery like spaghetti. So critics are interested in the fact that the subject has the likeness-maker, but not in the fact that it gives the subject the likeness, because appreciation involves perceiving that it has the likeness-maker, but does not involve perceiving that the likeness-maker gives it the likeness.

Consider now cases in which the likeness-maker attributed is the property of providing an experience of a certain kind, as when Miller calls Hollinghurst's prose 'faintly perfumed.' It is implausible to say that appreciating the prose involves perceiving that it *provides* this experience. Rather, appreciating the prose involves *having* this experience.

Both of these cases, however, raise a question. We have established what critics are doing in each case and why they are doing it: communicating that *p* (because appreciation involves perceiving that *p*), and communicating that the object provides a certain kind of experience (because appreciation involves having that experience). Why, however, is the critic communicating these things by attributing likenesses? As I have stressed, appreciation, in *these* cases, does not involve perceiving that the subject of the metaphor has the likeness indicated by the metaphorical element. It only involves perceiving that it has the likeness-makers attributed (in the one case) or having a kind of experience, the subject's capacity or disposition to provide which is the likeness-maker attributed (in the other case). Rather, appreciation involves perceiving that it has the likeness-makers attributed (in the one case) or responding in a certain way (in the other case). So the question arises: why attribute the likeness at all?

Of course, one might think that the critic's metaphors do not *attribute* likenesses in these cases, but only attribute likeness-makers for a likeness indicated by the metaphorical element. As I said shortly after introducing the Minimal Thesis, it would be consistent with the Minimal Thesis to hold this view. But even if this is right, there still arises the question: why is the critic attributing these properties by indicating a likeness for which they are likeness-makers? Whether the likeness itself is being attributed or not, the critic is getting us to think of a likeness for which the properties attributed are likeness-makers. Given that, in these cases, appreciating the work does not involve thinking of this likeness, why is the critic doing this?

To answer this question, I must first point out two things about these metaphors.

(i) Specificity

Consider the following passage by John Ruskin, who describes arriving in Venice by boat and seeing

> the long ranges of columned palaces, – each with its black boat moored at the portal, – each with its image cast down, beneath its feet, upon that green pavement which every breeze broke into new fantasies of rich tessellation,

and observing how 'the front of the Ducal palace, flushed with its sanguine veins, looks to the snowy dome of Our Lady of Salvation.'[30]

The first notable feature of the metaphors in this passage is that they are very *specific* descriptions. Take the metaphor of breezes breaking the water's surface into fantasies of rich tessellation. There are many ways water looks when breezes blow across its surface. There are fewer ways it looks when breezes blow across its surface and make it look like something broken into many pieces. And there are still fewer ways it looks when breezes blow across its surface and make it look like something broken into pieces forming a rich mosaic with the colours of Venetian palaces and a greenish tint.

Ruskin's metaphor communicates that the waters of Venice have properties making them look like that. And to characterize them this way is to characterize them very specifically – especially in comparison with many

[30] John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (London: George Allen, 1900), Vol. II, p. 3.

other, more obvious alternative descriptions. Just as 'crimson' is a more specific description of a thing's appearance than 'red,' this is a more specific description than many alternatives. The more specific description is the more informative; and Ruskin's metaphor is an unusually informative description of the way the waters of Venice look.

Metaphors used to communicate that the object provides a certain experience, or elicits a certain response, can also be very specific. The response itself can be characterized very specifically.

An example is Clark's description of *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes* (Figure 6). After a night spent without catching anything, the Apostles, on Christ's command, are hauling up their nets, which are suddenly full of fish. Clark writes:

> A rhythmic cadence runs through the whole composition, rising and falling, held back and released, like a perfectly constructed Handelian melody. If we follow it from right to left … we see how the 'river god,' like a stoker, drives us into the group of heroic fishermen and how the rich, involved movement of this group winds up a coil of energy; then comes an artful link with the standing Apostle, whose left hand is backed by the fisherman's billowing drapery, and then St Andrew himself forming a *caesura*, a climax in the line, which holds us back without lessening our momentum. Then, at last, the marvellous acceleration, the praying St Peter to whose passionate movement all these devices have been a preparation, and finally the comforting

figure of Christ, whose hand both checks and accepts St Peter's emotion.[31]

[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

Figure 6. Raphael, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, 1515-1516. Bodycolour on paper laid into canvas. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Consider the metaphors of the rhythmic cadence and of the standing St Andrew forming a caesura. A caesura is a pause near the middle of a line of poetry. Elaborating the rhythmic-cadence metaphor, Clark communicates with the caesura metaphor that the appropriate response to this part of the painting is like a response to a caesura in a line of poetry. He does not, however, communicate that it is like this response merely in that it is one of pausing. He characterizes it much more specifically than that. We pause here after having followed the line of Apostles from the right, our gaze moving along naturally as we attend to salient parts like the heads, shoulders, arms, and hands, in turn. Our attention to these salient parts as we move along is like our attention to the stressed syllables in a line of poetry, spaced at regular intervals in an intelligible pattern, propelling our attention along as we read. And we pause at St Andrew without finding the pause jarring, despite the fact that it interrupts the prior movement of our attention.

(ii) Experiences

The second thing to note about metaphors of this kind is that they tend to cause a reader to have, or to imagine or recall having, certain experiences.

[31] Clark, 'Raphael: *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*,' pp. 64-65.

What makes Ruskin's metaphor vivid and evocative is that it tends to cause a reader to imagine seeing the waters of Venice. Clark's description accompanies a reproduction of Raphael's painting. It causes us to look at the picture and try to imagine, or to have, the kind of response he is communicating that the painting elicits. Other metaphors I have mentioned have similar effects. When you first hear of the spaghetti style, and a (reproduction of a) painting in that style is visible, you are likely to look at it to see what is being attributed.

Many of those who have written about metaphor think there is a causal connection between metaphor and perception. Davidson and Scruton, among many others, think there is such a connection between metaphor and perceiving-as. Many have also thought that metaphor causes us to imagine having certain experiences. Aristotle says in the *Rhetoric* that 'liveliness is got by using the proportional type of metaphor and by making our hearers see things.'[32] George Orwell writes that 'A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image,'[33] while Richard Moran cites numerous philosophers and literary theorists who have held such a view.[34]

However, few have seen *why* there is this connection. Moran discusses the temptation among the writers he cites to suppose, not only that metaphors

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[32] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, in Vol. II, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1411b.

[33] George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language,' in *Essays*, ed. Bernard Crick (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 350.

[34] See Richard Moran, 'Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image, and Force,' *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1989), pp. 89-94.

cause us to imagine, but that having certain mental images 'is what constitutes the full understanding of a metaphor.'[35] That temptation is certainly to be resisted. But what is true is that, often, one cannot figure out what properties the metaphor attributes unless one perceives, recalls perceiving, or imagines perceiving the subject of the metaphor. Many metaphors are more or less impenetrable until you take a look at (or imagine or recall seeing) the subject, and see what properties make it like what the metaphor communicates that it is like. In many contexts, you need to see (or imagine or recall seeing) that the subject has certain likeness-making properties in order to tell that the metaphor attributes them. This is not what understanding the metaphor consists in: rather, it is often what *enables* us to understand metaphors. For we need to know what properties the metaphor attributes to its subject in order to understand it.

It seems clear that perceiving and imagining perceiving play this role in our coming to understand the metaphors considered above. We look at the vase-painting and try to see what the speaker means by describing it as being drawn in the spaghetti style. To figure out what kind of way of looking Ruskin is attributing to the water, we try to imagine seeing water that looks like what Ruskin communicates that Venice's waters look like. We also use imagination, whilst perceiving the reproduction of the painting, to figure out what kind of response Clark claims the painting elicits.

Now this is not, I stress, a claim about every property attributed by every metaphor. For example, it would obviously not apply to properties one

[35] *Ibid*., p. 92.

cannot perceive that something has. Moreover, it would not normally be true of the *likeness* indicated or attributed by a metaphor that (imagining or recalling) perceiving that the subject has that likeness is the easiest or only available way of figuring out what likeness is indicated or attributed. If the Minimal Thesis is correct, you can infer that a likeness has been indicated or attributed if you know that a metaphor has been used in the first place; and if you know which expression in the metaphor is the metaphorical element, it is normally not difficult to figure out which likeness it is. Rather, we often need perception, perceptual memory, or perceptual imagination to figure out which *likeness-makers* are attributed.[36]

Why is this so? The answer is not hard to find. For many expressions used metaphorically, but especially those of which this claim is true, we cannot rely wholly or even partly on our familiarity with past metaphorical uses of them to figure out which likeness-makers they are attributing – as we often can rely on familiarity with past literal uses of an expression to figure out what is being communicated when it is used literally. Certainly, with some metaphorical uses of expressions, we can do this. Expressions like 'pig,' 'lion,' and 'block of ice' normally attribute certain likeness-makers rather than others when used metaphorically, at least when the subject of the metaphor is human. For certain expressions, there are certain likeness-makers we can assume are being attributed when those expressions are used metaphorically and when the subject is of a certain kind, in the absence of indications to the

[36] Or to figure out which properties, possession of which is a way of possessing likeness-makers for the indicated likeness, are attributed.

contrary. In these cases, we can indeed rely on familiarity with past metaphorical uses of that expression.

Many metaphorical uses of expressions, however, are not like this. This may be because we never have encountered a metaphorical use of that expression before. Vivid or interesting metaphors are often novel.

Alternatively, it may be because we have never encountered that expression used metaphorically to attribute the likeness-makers it attributes on this occasion. The same expression can be used metaphorically in different contexts to attribute different likeness-makers. We attribute different properties when we call John Major 'grey' than we do when we speak of a 'grey area' in morality or law.

So a metaphor may have for its metaphorical element an expression we have never seen used metaphorically before, or an expression used metaphorically to attribute properties we have never known it to attribute before. If so, then we cannot rely entirely, or at all, on familiarity with past metaphorical uses of the expression to figure out which likeness-makers it attributes now. We need some other way of figuring this out. In such cases, perceiving the metaphor's subject, or imagining or recalling perceiving it, is sometimes the only way, or the easiest way, of figuring out what likeness-makers are attributed.

This explains why it is *novel* metaphors, in particular, that have been singled out for their connection with perceiving and imagining perceiving. In the quotation given above, for example, Orwell characterizes 'newly invented' metaphors as evoking visual images; similarly, Scruton writes that

'dead metaphors achieve nothing, but living metaphors change the way things are perceived'[37]; and this is borne out by considering examples of metaphors that prompt us to perceive or imagine perceiving. They tend to be novel, like Ruskin's and Clark's, rather than clichés.

(iii) Why Critics Use Metaphor

I said above that, when appreciation does not involve perceiving that the likeness-makers attributed give the subject of the metaphor the likeness indicated, critics use metaphor because appreciation does involve perceiving that the subject of the metaphor *has* the likeness-makers attributed. This raised the question of why, in such cases, critics use metaphor at all, given that it attributes or indicates likenesses as well. We are now in a position to answer this question.

The first reason is that critics often want to get their readers to perceive, or to imagine or recall perceiving, that something has the properties that appreciation involves perceiving that it has. Metaphor tends to cause a reader to perceive (or imagine or recall perceiving) that the object has the likeness-makers it attributes. This explains why, when appreciation involves perceiving that the subject of the metaphor has the likeness-making properties, the critic uses the metaphor. By speaking in a way her reader cannot (fully) understand without perceiving, imagining perceiving, or recalling perceiving what she wants them to, she impels the reader to perceive, imagine, or recall what she wants them to. Attributing or indicating

[37] Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (O.U.P., 2009), p. 124.

a certain likeness with a metaphor prompts the reader to look for, or to try to imagine perceiving, the likeness-makers for it that are being attributed.

I have not yet defended the claim that critics often want to get their readers to *imagine* or to *recall* perceiving that something has properties that appreciation involves perceiving that it has. It is a commonplace in aesthetics that critics try to get their readers to perceive that objects have certain properties. Philosophers less often notice that critics often try to get their readers to imagine or to recall perceiving that something has such properties. But clearly this is often the case. In many contexts, critics do not presuppose that their readers are in a position to perceive what they describe or a reproduction of it. Many passages in Ruskin and Pater illustrate this. Writers of reviews do not presuppose that their readers have perceived the work under review. And critics may also describe works they do assume their readers have perceived, in order to get them to recall perceiving what the critic wants to discuss.

This brings us to the second reason why critics so often use metaphor to attribute likeness-makers of the kind I have been considering. I said that metaphors can characterize their subject, or the response elicited by it, very specifically, and that critics' metaphors often do. On account of their capacity to be specific, metaphors can enable us very *accurately* to imagine or recall perceiving their subject.

Obviously, a critic who wants to enable the reader to imagine or recall perceiving the subject of the metaphor wants to cause her to imagine or recall this experience as accurately as possible. I assume it is evident that one can

imagine or recall the experience of perceiving an actual object more or less accurately. (For the sake of brevity, I shall hereafter discuss only the case of imagining perceiving. What I shall say also applies *mutatis mutandis* to recalling perceiving, and to imagining or recalling responses to the subject of the metaphor.) If the object is a red square, for example, then you more accurately imagine seeing it if you imagine seeing a red square than you do if you imagine seeing an otherwise identical black square. This is so even if the square you have imagined seeing does not possess the *shade* of red possessed by the actual square. You have still imagined the experience of seeing the actual square more accurately than when you imagine seeing a black square, even though you have not imagined this experience with perfect accuracy.

The more specific a description is, the more informative it is. Therefore, assuming the reader *can* imagine perceiving that the object has the properties attributed by a more specific description when she encounters that description, the critic can be sure of the reader getting more right when she uses the more specific description than she can be when she uses a less specific description. A reader might, of course, imagine the experience of seeing the red square with perfect accuracy if she is only told that what she is to imagine seeing is 'a coloured shape.' But the critic obviously does not *ensure* this by using this description. Describing the object as 'a red square,' by contrast, ensures at least that the reader imagines something square and red. Therefore, given that the critic wants to cause the reader to imagine, as accurately as possible, the experience of perceiving the object, she does well to

get the reader to imagine perceiving that the subject has the properties attributed with a more specific description.

So metaphors not only often prompt a reader to imagine or recall perceiving their subjects. Metaphors that are very specific characterizations prompt a reader to imagine or recall this experience very accurately. A reader who imagines perceiving that the waters of Venice have the properties attributed by Ruskin's metaphor imagines with great accuracy the experience of perceiving the waters of Venice. Ruskin ensures that she imagines this with greater accuracy than he would if he prompted her to imagine perceiving that the waters have the properties attributed by more obvious, less imaginative alternative descriptions (e.g., saying that the waters sparkle in the sunlight).

Conclusion

We now have an explanation of the prevalence of metaphor in criticism.

(1) Critics often attribute properties, in describing artworks, because appreciation involves perceiving that the object has those properties. Appreciation, in turn, often involves perceiving that certain properties give the object a certain likeness. By using metaphor, critics can give us to understand that certain properties give something a certain likeness. That is one reason why critics frequently use metaphor.

(2) Critics often want to *cause* readers to perceive that the object has certain properties, when appreciation involves perceiving that it has those properties; or to imagine or recall this experience accurately. So too, they

often want to cause readers to have, or to accurately imagine or recall having, the kind of response to the object that appreciation of it involves having. Using metaphors, especially novel ones, is an effective way of achieving these aims. Such metaphors are often hard to understand without perceiving, imagining perceiving, or recalling perceiving the object. Using one therefore prompts a reader to perceive, imagine, or recall what the critic wants her to. In addition, metaphors can be very specific, and this can ensure that the reader recalls or imagines this experience very accurately.

Coleridge said of Shakespeare, 'You feel him to be a poet, inasmuch as, for a time, he has made you one – an active creative being.' If my account here is successful, it helps explain why, so often, engaging with art makes poets out of critics.