REBECCA WELLS-JOPLING / KEITH OATLEY

Metonymy and Intimacy

A metaphor has two terms, one of which is to be mapped into the other. A metonym also has two terms, but with no necessary similarity or mapping between them. It is a linguistic figure and way of thinking in which one term prompts, or connects with, another by a mental association in the hearer or reader. We follow Jakobson's (1956) proposal that metaphor is at the semantic pole of language and works by similarity, whereas metonymy is at the syntactic pole, and works by juxtaposition. Gerrig (1993) has argued that some kinds of innovative language make for intimacy between a writer and a reader. We extend his argument by proposing that metonymy, specifically, can have this property, because a metonym can derive from any association made in the mind of the writer who hopes that the reader will make the same kind of association in his or her own mind. The effect can be to allow the reader to enter the other's mind in a way that is similar to that of self-disclosure between friends. From Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, we give literary examples of metonymy, including its best-known kind, synecdoche, and also of juxtapositions of events and ideas that enable readers to enter the mind of Anna. We follow this with an example of an invitation to intimacy from Woolf's To The Lighthouse. Readers who are unwilling or unable to enter the mental world of a particular piece of fiction are likely to miss intimacy-prompting metonyms, and see them as merely incidental to a story.

We then take our proposal through three further stages. The first stage is to relate it to Clark's (2008) proposal that the mind is a hybrid, with an intuitive-associative processor that runs on distributed neural networks, plus a more recently installed, verbal-deliberative processor the conclusions of which enter consciousness as short-term working memory. A writer's job is to translate intuitions of the associative processor into terms of the verbal-deliberative processor, and externalize them onto the page. A reader's job is to take in verbal forms such as metonyms and translate them into intuitions that can be linked in the associative processor. The second stage is to relate our argument to Baumeister/Masicampo's (2010) proposal that consciousness is not the initiator of actions, but a simulation that relates autobiographical memory, understanding of the social world, and future planning. A piece of fiction is a simulation of a similar kind, which can be incorporated into a reader's ongoing conscious simulation. A third stage is to show that childhood acquisition of language involves what Tomasello (1995) calls joint attentional scenes, in which an attachment figure and an infant jointly attend to some third object, often give it a name (a synecdoche), and also attend to each other. These processes of acquisition, themselves based on metonymy, then,

offer a template for intimacy, on which the later reading of literary works can build.

We end our essay with the reflection that metonymy has many of the properties stressed in Indian poetics, under the rubric of dhvani, the Sanskrit term for suggestion, which depends on a relationship between a writer or performer and a reader or audience member.

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