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Claes Entzenberg: *Metaphor as a Mode of Interpretation – An Essay on Interactional and Contextual Sense-Making Processes, Metaphorology and Verbal Arts*

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Are these vintage years for Nordic PhDs in Aesthetics? The two I read this year certainly suggest this, beginning with Simo Säätelä's splendid *Aesthetics as Grammar* and now Claes Entzenberg's dissertation on metaphor.

Entzenberg's position can be briefly described. There has been a massive amount of work on metaphor in the last three decades, and Entzenberg seems to have read most of it – his bibliography alone is very valuable – and it is almost entirely marked by a common error, that of supposing that a metaphor is an entity out there in the linguistic world, so to speak. The mistaken assumption is that metaphors are deviant utterances which can be identified either by the way their sentence structure breaks semantic rules so as to produce nonsense or by the way they defy the obvious in producing falsehood. The rather limited diet

of examples in the literature has, of course, tended to reinforce this presumption. 'Richard is a gorilla', 'James is a pig', 'Lisa is a cat' are about as interesting, imaginative or funny as you are likely to get. The extensive literature of the subject has tended to concentrate on finding lexical rules by means of which we can identify metaphors. Metaphors, once recognised, may then be interpreted in various ways. Entzenberg rejects this in favour of something more fluid and context bound. Metaphor and interpretation are inseparable and we make metaphors by our decision to interpret. To the question when does a linguistic item become a metaphor, he returns the answer 'it becomes metaphorical when interpreted that way.' Such a decision is prompted by context.

Entzenberg begins with a survey of the long history of the topic. Aristotle, Vico, Rousseau, Nietzsche and Derrida are discussed at some length. More contemporary writers with whom he deals include Max Black, Beardsley, Searle, Davidson and Samuel Levin, the last of whom encapsulates in a very clear form the errors which Entzenberg detects in traditional theory. There is, as well, a discussion of Lakoff and Johnson's influential work. Here Entzenberg objects to any account which shares the Nietzschean mistake of failing to allow for a distinction between

the literal and the metaphorical and this argument is thematic in the ensuing discussion. All this paves the way for an informal account which denies that metaphor is fixed by speaker's intention, or by some autonomous features of the language or that the individual has license to interpret as he thinks fit. These he calls respectively the intentionalist, the linguistic and the receptionist fallacy. (Though one might argue that he is not free from the taint of the latter, as we shall see.) Rather the speaker or writer operates in a social and cultural context. The final chapter, then is devoted to an exploration of the contextualisation of metaphor along with a protracted example from Stig Dagerman, a writer on whom Entzenberg is an expert and in whose work he has had a long established interest.

That Entzenberg is right about all this is evidenced by the fact that pretty well any sentence one cares to think about could be given a metaphorical interpretation in the appropriate context. 'My word processor is slow this morning' could be a metaphor in which I was alluding to the slowness with which I responded to questions in class and so on. Any criticisms I offer must, then be viewed in the light of broad agreement with Entzenberg. But I do have some problems.

Firstly, the theory seems to be designed with a view to the understanding of poetry or poetic prose and this rather distorts matters. In emphasising the openness of a metaphor to interpretation, Entzenberg underplays or even collapses a distinction, and the distinction is between metaphors which bear a settled and even univocal interpretation and metaphors whose range of interpretation are, to all intents and purposes, unlimited. A literary metaphor usually falls into the latter category. When Lady Macbeth says 'Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, to cry, hold! hold!' we have an utterance of such richness that the explication will wind on. 'Blanket' suggests something all enveloping, something stifling, obscuring etc. all of which contrives to multiply the almost physical sensation the line gives us. But a metaphor might be simply a colourful way of stating a simple fact. I used to have a colleague whose untidiness was a by-word. She insisted she could find anything she needed but most of us found it hard to discover how a student's essay did not disappear for ever. If I called her office 'a haystack' my statement is minimally metaphorical, perhaps, but the metaphor is not dead and it conveys a straight fact albeit in a slightly more ear-catching way. It was true and there was one correct

interpretation. (A metaphor might be true under two or more possible interpretations, of course.)

This suggests a second problem. Some metaphors, I suggest are true or false in that there is a correct interpretation and that interpretation is a sentence which is true or false. How do we decide whether this is a metaphor of this category? Perhaps another example will help here. My wife and sister-in-law went to look at a house on the Welsh/English border with a view to purchasing it. It was largely derelict having fallen into the possession of a scion of the British aristocracy who had opted for a hippy lifestyle. Nobody was resident save an obliging pig who met them at the gate, escorted them from room to room and from barn to shed, and then back to the gate, watching them wistfully as they drove away. 'Were you shown around?' 'Yes, by a pig!' Naturally any hearer took this as a metaphor, suggesting that the owner or agent was a fairly disgusting individual. But it was to be taken literally because that is what the speaker intended. It was a mistake, though a very excusable mistake, to take it metaphorically.

But can Entzenberg allow this? If it is the interpreter who, through his act of interpretation, makes a metaphor metaphorical, which is his position, there is no space in his account for a

metaphor to be mistakenly so taken. Yet that is unquestionably the right procedure in this case. What can Entzenberg say to this? Well, his natural recourse is to say that the context decides and in this case, context demands that we interpret it as a metaphor. But if this is so, context has a very wide role indeed and there must be a suspicion of the ad hoc. For, crucially, context now embraces speaker's intention – something which classical accounts of metaphor often privilege and from which Entzenberg has been at pains to distance himself. It is, in any case, not clear how the context would have told me what was the right way to take the remark about the pig. Context alone would not tell me what the speaker's intention was. And had I been present at the viewing of the property, the remark would not have been made in the first place. There was a right way to take the observation and that was determined by the intention of the speaker. That intention cannot plausibly be taken as part of the context without redefining 'context'; but if the plausibility of the position depends on a redefining of 'context' it is weak.

Can this be repaired? Two things to be said here, I think. The first is that the notion of 'interpretation', central to Entzenberg's project, is threatened as well by uncertainty about the scope of

'context'. Entzenberg rightly refuses to take 'interpretation' as widely as, say, Davidson does and the fact is that a correct reading of the remark about being shown around by a pig is not interpretative at all any more than my observation to an inquirer that Stockholm is south of Uppsala is something for interpretation. But since his own argument requires an equally wide notion of context, he may find himself in the same boat as Davidson as far as 'interpretation' is concerned. (And the discussion of Davidson is, incidentally, excellent.) For if interpretation is, as it must be, context-based – taking its particular form from the context in which we find it, it will follow that if 'context' is insufficiently defined so is 'interpretation'. The point here is that a Gadamer-style emphasis on the context of interpretation is required to explain why a certain interpretation is appealing. That a director or a critic thinks of *The Tempest* as a play about colonialism is explained by the fact that the moral obloquy we attach to colonialism and our guilt about it are central features of our culture. If we think of the text of *The Tempest* as containing metaphors for colonialism we do so because of our cultural background. One does not have to be an echt-Gadamerian to allow that interpretations are doubly determined both by the cul-

ture of the interpreter and by the work itself (and what the work means is itself determined by the culture of *ITS* origin.) I am attracted to the view that the culture of the critic may aid him to find out what is available in the work itself. I do not think we are committed by all this to the conclusion that anything goes. But the problem for Entzenberg is that if 'context' is unclear then so is 'interpretation' and there seems no theory-driven reason to object to Davidson's wide sense of 'interpretation'. The puzzle can be more simply put. If to elect to take a statement as a metaphor is to interpret it as metaphorical on the basis of context, then not to take it as metaphorical ought equally to be an interpretation, this time interpreting it as literal. But now all statements are interpreted. But Entzenberg cannot have this because the whole thrust of his thesis is that metaphors become so because they are occasions for interpretation.

Now Entzenberg can escape this objection by distinguishing what an interpretation means from the explanation of how we came to suggest it in the first place. But the critic will pursue him. The context which explains why an interpretation suggested itself is also what enabled us to understand that interpretation in the first place. The price of such a heavy

emphasis on 'context' is paid not only in troubles over the concept of a context but in troubles over the concept of 'interpretation'.

Secondly, I think that even if Entzenberg does expand his analysis of 'context', he cannot avoid the conclusion that no one account does for all the different sorts of metaphor. Our literary institutions give us far more license in exploring the possibilities of alternative interpretations of metaphor than do metaphors in political speeches, in theology, in the natural sciences, not to mention day-to-day exchanges. The overall conclusion might be a little more Wittgensteinian than Entzenberg allows. Metaphors have different characteristics in different circumstances. This makes metaphor even more contextually based and might turn out to be more consistent with his general approach than he would have suspected. There is a surprising unity after all in the theory, albeit at a deeper level than, I suspect, Entzenberg appreciates.

These criticisms should not be allowed to detract from what is a substantial addition to the already very large corpus of work on metaphor. The objections Entzenberg makes to standard accounts are invariably just and anybody who reads this will benefit. The central thesis, that metaphors cannot be picked out by a purely

formal mechanism, is important and correct and if linguists and philosophers of language take it on board they will stop wasting a good deal of time and research funding. And there is no higher compliment we can pay to a PhD dissertation than that.