Peace by Metaphor

Daneen Wardrop, Western Michigan University

Metaphor, as studied by the relatively new school of cognitive linguistics, has been shown to govern political and advertising campaigns.[1] In fact, advertisers go to great lengths *not* to say a thing in a straightforward manner, but to say it in terms of something else. As Friedrich Ungerer in his study of advertisement states it, the role of metaphors "in advertising can hardly be underestimated," and it is "no matter whether the advertised item is represented in the advert as a picture or a brand name, it is never presented in isolation, i. e., the conceptualization is never restricted to the concept of the item itself" (321). My concern is that such usage of metaphor in advertising and politics, to the extent that politics is bent on "selling" itself, is directed to a generation of students who need to be further prepared to discern poetic techniques, such as the use of the metaphor. Students can benefit from supplementing their already existing literacies in the visual image with the ability to examine rigorously the ways in which language, particularly the metaphor, can be used to direct their thinking and actions.

To address this concern, I suggest a series of six specific exercises to use toward the study of metaphor. Preparing students to read metaphor, directing them to an intensified focus on the changeable elements of the metaphor may very well be one of the crucial things we

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[1] Cognitive linguistics is generally understood to have originated with Lakoff and Johnson's 1980 study, and can be characterized as departing "from the mainstream generative linguistics" by contending that "natural language is a product of the human mind, based on the same organizing principles that operate in other domains" (Yu 12, 13).

can do for them.[2]   Robert Frost in his classic essay, "Education by Metaphor," suggested the "touch and go" nature of the metaphor, understanding as he did the necessity of having to live with the metaphor long enough for the reader to know her or his way around language. By spending time investigating this "touch and go" nature of the metaphor, students can find a renewed awareness of such dynamics in our poetic, economic, and political lives.

In the movie, *Il Postino,* the metaphor exists as something imbued with wonder—a key to both artistry and intimacy, the ultimate aesthetic technique uttered in the hallowed, breathless word, "*metafore.*" Be that as it may, studies of literature have arrived now at an understanding of the metaphor as something often bland or irrelevant, perhaps retrograde or even naïve. The decades of the mid-twentieth century during which critics and teachers attended to poetic devices in any detail have disappeared with the formalism that provided the aegis under which to approach them. Indeed, the "historical obsolescence of form" now appears self-evident in the face of cultural and historical studies which generally preclude form in order to emphasize commitment to political goals: "Commitment makes sense, we suppose, only in the realm of ends—a commitment to social justice, political liberty, world peace, mutual tolerance, universal happiness, or some other worthy goal," and operating as a part of this

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[2] Further reasons compel us to turn us to a renewed study of metaphor. While it is essential to understand differences between cultures, cognitive linguists are opening up studies of the ways in which cultures are similar, finding universalities through studies of metaphors across cultures and languages. For just one example, preliminary investigations by Kövecses find similar metaphors for the emotion of anger in English, Hungarian, Japanese, Chinese, Zulu, Polish, Wolof (from Senegal) (165-70).

commitment we understand that "form seems at best to belong to the merely instrumental sphere of means" (Mitchell 322).[3]

The prevalent distrust of the formal elements of poetry may account in part for the difficulty I feel in teaching students who increasingly expect or desire that every text be prose. Students have become impatient with the notion of a poem; even some English majors exhibit this frustration and distrust. Accordingly, the more rhetorical the interpretation that arises from a poem the more comfortable students seem to be with that reading, and the more worthwhile and suitable to study they comprehend the poem to be. Indeed, poetry has come to be taught like prose, as can be seen in any or many such textbooks as *Angles of Vision,* for just one example, which states as its purpose the anthologization of poems from which political and social messages can be garnered readily. This outlook is fine in and of itself, but as a marker of a trend, it regards poetry as a kind of writing that has for some reason decided to form itself impetuously on the page but that otherwise might be, in particular cases, winningly examined as rhetoric and hence acceptable.

The action of a metaphor, however, has a prodigious cultural and social register. Attending to metaphor usage can prompt a new awareness of the dynamics of political power positioning. While the teaching of poetic techniques has nearly run aground in studies of literature in the academy, the usage of metaphor, never having abated in poetry itself, of course, has hardly receded in popular parlance, either—and that includes political discourse. George Lakoff, for example, examines metaphors for the ways they control our thinking, as in these observations concerning the

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[3] It is important to stress that Mitchell is setting up his argument in these statements, an argument decidedly amendable to a formalism versed in political understandings.

American leaders' use of words following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001:

Because the concept of "war "doesn't fit, there is a frantic search for metaphors. First, Bush called the terrorists "cowards"—but this didn't seem to work too well for martyrs who willing sacrificed their lives for their moral and religious ideals.

More recently he has spoken of "smoking them out of their holes" as if they were rodents, and Rumsfeld has spoken of "drying up the swamp they live in" as if they were snakes or lowly swamp creatures. The conceptual metaphors here are Moral Is Up; Immoral Is Down (they are lowly) and Immoral People Are Animals (that live close to the ground).

Such insights can renew critical thinking in our political decisions. In order to reinvigorate investigations of the metaphor in the classroom, I offer here six assignments to comprise a unit on metaphor, as follows: (1) a search for metaphor in the advertisements included in popular magazines, (2) a reading of George Lakoff's analysis of metaphor used in popular and news contexts, (3) a search for war metaphors in magazines. Following that preparation, exercises 4-6 will cover three specific poems by Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Michael Palmer. Students can undertake the first three of the assignments as homework, then bring the work back to class to discuss in groups and with the class as a whole.

The first assignment addresses advertisements in magazines. Students may be asked to read through the advertisements in one entire magazine of their choice, to list metaphors contained therein, bring this list to class, and discuss it in smaller groups. The more specifically aimed the audience of the magazine—say, a motorcycle or guitar or fashion magazine, the more likely, the presupposition goes, the metaphors are to be tilted toward that subject. Does the magazine research bear this out? Students should look for attention-getting metaphors, but they should also

list common, even clichéd, metaphors. Such an exercise provides a useful way to become more conversant in metaphor-making, and to realize how fully they pervade our speaking and reading lives.

Let me take for example an advertisement from *Time* magazine, in which Chevrolet urges consumers to purchase a new truck by claiming that the truck is "a sledgehammer in a ballpeen world." Aside from the fact that Freudian critics might enjoy analyzing this copy, and aside from the fact that Chevrolet undoubtedly was aware that the copy included a kind of humor or alacrity, we can see that the company relies upon seducing buyers by representing the truck as a tool of power, and not only that but a tool designated specifically for the use of smashing. It is not enough for the truck to transport the consumer and the items the consumer hauls reliably from one point to another, but instead the truck, transformed by language into a personal tool, has to stand as an instrument of force. Clearly, this metaphorical equation holds: Chevrolet = power, especially personal, hand-held power.

What does this have to do with studying poetry and peace? Saying one thing in terms of another provides an extremely handy maneuver for those who want to have their product or platform take precedence, and students educated to discern such maneuvers can become more adept at interrogating the multitudinous metaphors presented to them on a day-to-day, often minute-to-minute basis. Contemporary poet Hayden Carruth asserts eloquently that advertising "is the most corrupt and corrupting mental activity of the human race" and that "it has not only destroyed language, it has directly caused the increase of violence in our civil life, of death and misery, of war" (cited in Holden 170). If we read with attention to metaphors, we examine the ways in which language manipulates opinion; needless to say, manipulation is nothing new to sellers or

politicians, but the barrage of such information increases daily, and so quickly as to be daunting.

In general, many people seem to think that metaphor is something existing outside their everyday lives, but nothing could be further from the truth. One of the pervasive myths concerning metaphor in the popular mind--imaged, by the way, piquantly in the above-mentioned *Il Postino*--is that metaphor-making constitutes a special talent utilized only by paragons or geniuses, such as Shakespeare or Keats,[4] but metaphors are an omnipresent facet of everyday speech observable in such workaday examples as the following: "Her career was *in ruins*," or "Let's hope he can keep the team *on the road* to success," or "Everyone says what a happy, *sunny* girl she was" (Kövecses vii). One might object that such metaphors are "dead metaphors," or clichés, as they are, but it is exactly such dead metaphors that remain emphatically alive in usage, continuing subliminally to shape the contours of our thinking processes, for "what is deeply entrenched, hardly noticed, and thus effortlessly used is most active in our thought" (Kövecses ix). In the cognitive linguistic view endorsed by Lakoff and Johnson, dead metaphors govern our thinking processes, and as such, "metaphor ceases to be the sole device of creative literary imagination; it becomes a valuable cognitive tool without which neither poets nor you and I as ordinary people could live" (Kövecses ix). Such a valuable insight keys us to differentiating advertising and political rhetoric from poetry itself; both use metaphors, but the former more often uses clichés or dead language so as to manipulate an audience, while the

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[4] In fact, in *Il Postino,* the first time Mario makes a metaphor, and Neruda points it out to him, Mario says it doesn't count because he didn't mean to do it, thus reinforcing the general perception that the only metaphors that count are the ones created by the Nerudas of the world.

poetry works intensively to find fresh language that enlivens its perceptions and provides crisp ways of seeing.[5] The intentions of advertising and political metaphor are distinct from poetic metaphor, the one with the intent to mollify and the other with the intent to discomfit or startle.

For the second assignment, I broach the topic of the war in Iraq, and ask students to engage in a reading of a George Lakoff essay, either from one of his books, *Metaphors We Live By*, written with Mark Johnson, or *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, or in one of various easily accessible websites, including "Metaphors of Terror," "Metaphor and War," "Metaphor and War, Again," "Gulf War Metaphor, Part I," and especially "Gulf War Metaphor, Part II." In this last website, Lakoff discusses some of the common metaphors used to justify the most recent Gulf War, including the following: the figure of the nation as a person, the villain as irrational, the victim as innocent, and victory as signification that the game is over. Students should bring to class one of the metaphors offered by Lakoff and be prepared to discuss its efficacy or inefficacy in their own thinking about the war. They can apply the metaphor Lakoff introduces to the current stage of war in Iraq or Afghanistan, or the impending threats of going to war with Iran. Students may choose to further Lakoff's insights by adding their own observations of metaphors used concerning the war.

To illustrate, I offer the example of former President Bush's famous phrase using a relatively obvious construction of metaphor, "Axis of Evil" (Addresses 1) and later, "Operation Iraqi Freedom" (Operation 1). The first

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[5] I must admit, however, that I find the Chevrolet commercial cited above relatively inventive and even a little humorous. If ad copy can sometimes muster alacrity, political rhetoric seems virtually never able to do that.

phrase, "Axis of Evil," draws on the Manichean sensibility of mid-twentieth-century cold war attitudes now used to justify war in a different time and place—the twenty-first century geopolitical region of Middle East. The second phrase, "Operation Iraqi Freedom," offers the word "operation" to function metaphorically to connote a mission (important, exciting, even crusading),[6] as well as precision surgery (perhaps to remove a tumor, but in this case removed by "precision" bombing).[7] The above considerations form just the beginning of possible classroom discussions concerning catch phrases and the ways in which such words mold thinking and create an ontology managed by metaphor-making.[8]

As a third exercise, then, I invite students to follow the metaphors in a weekly news magazine for at least three successive issues. They should note the name of the publication, concentrate on the Iraq segment of the

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[6] Not least of all, the phrase conjures, with the religion-tinctured word, "evil," the need for a kind of crusade. It is not difficult to find the governing metaphors in this phrase. The problem is compounded, of course, by the fact that Saddam Hussein really has perpetrated evil actions, but the people of the Middle East are hardly part of an axis of evil. While the Administration's position makes this distinction, the justifying phrase does not. Saddam is arguably a monstrous figure, but the administration's monster imagery shows a near obsession with recounting lingering details of torture, the "opprobrious acid drips" and electrical shocks, as Emily White, for instance, argues. See her analyses of Bush's use of monster and bogeyman language to justify war in which she observes that the phrase "axis of evil" is "biblical, apocalyptic," evoking "a dark machine geared up to pull the West into the underworld."

[7] While much has been made by the administration of the relatively humanitarian tactic of precision bombing, and the oft-repeated assertion that the United States' aggression was directed at Saddam and his cohorts rather than the people of Iraq, little is said of the actual civilian casualties in that country. A *Time* magazine article from April 2003 stated that the American deaths equaled 110 troops at that time, while the Iraqi casualties, according to some Pentagon officials, are estimated at more than 10,000 troops, with up to 2,000 civilian deaths. The fighting, though, "is just the start of the dying. A Columbia University study of the first Gulf War factored in disease and found that in addition to the 3,500 civilians who died in the fighting, 4,000 more died afterwards due to water contamination (Kluger 49).

[8] In addition, particularly fruitful to examine in the classroom might be Ari Fleischer's description of Syria as a "rogue" nation with a "young" leader in Bashar Assad, and Donald Rumsfeld's declaration of Syria as a nation that needs to "behave" (cited in Freedland 1).

publication, and record the metaphors used, observing whether the metaphors are the choice of the magazine writers/editors, or quotations from government officials, and which officials or politicians use the words.[9] For instance, during the week of April 19, 2004, *Time* magazine referred to its cover story on Iraq in this way: "State of Siege: As Rebellion Flares Up across Iraq, the U.S. Faces Its Toughest Test Yet." Let me call attention to the following words: "state of siege," "rebellion," "flares," "test"—and this just on the cover. Some possible implications are that the people of Iraq are engaging in a "rebellion" against the U.S., that action "flares" but hasn't fully caught flame, that the "flares" are disorderly and therefore not part of a respectable and orderly cause, and that foreign policy is not a global reality sometimes or often full of brutal reality but rather a kind of isolated "test" for the United States. Obviously, students' lists will be much longer and more detailed, but this gleaning from a title alone shows the rich possibilities.

In class, students can form groups in order to pool the findings, analyze the material, and discuss the implications of the metaphors used.[10] Did the findings mesh with Lakoff's observations on war and metaphor? What new formulations did the group find? How are terrorists

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[9] Another, but much more difficult option, would be to watch the evening news five nights running, recording the source of information--ABC, CNN, FOX, etc.--and focusing on the war segment of the broadcast. I would suggest students take pen in hand the minute the news segment begins and write almost continually, recording the words that they hear prominently, and afterwards cut some of the obvious miscues. Such listening is difficult work, and takes a practiced, dedicated ear, and intense concentration.

[10] For my working definition of metaphor I take from studies of cognitive linguists, who see the complications of metaphor in terms of human behavior: "Metaphor is the cognitive mechanism whereby one experiential domain is partially 'mapped', i.e. projected, onto a different experiential domain, so that the second domain is partially understood in terms of the first one" (Barcelona 3). In addition, metaphorical types of figurations can include simile and sometimes metonymy as does (Niemeier 196). I'll also add into my working definition the more traditional but insightful observation of Philip Wheelwright that the metaphor contains "psychic depth" (71).

referred to? American forces? How is the conflict referred to? If one were a speechwriter for George Bush or other politician, which words might be chosen to describe the war? What words might be chosen if one wished to sway the opinion of the general populace? Is there a progression in metaphor usage over the three weeks of studying one magazine? Can patterns of metaphors be mapped according to the news source? What does this say about how readers' thinking is patterned, depending upon the source? Needless to say, discussing such figures in classrooms can enable readers to move with increased agility among metaphor usage.

Contemporary study of the metaphor necessitates a thorough revisioning of the metaphor so as to see the figure's relative balance or stability but also to perceive the potential for oscillation and the unsteadiness of the equation. In this third exercise, students are invited to consider this question: At what point does the metaphor break down? I recur to Frost's famous essay to identify the tricky balancing act of the metaphor. Frost suggests that readers can track metaphors to the point at which the equations break down, as they always do, and he posits such tracking as one important way to guide students further in the rigors of learning to think, and think well:

> All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the beauty of it. It is touch and go with the metaphor, and until you have lived with it long enough you don't know when it is going. You don't know how much you can get out of it and when it will cease to yield. It is a very living thing. It is as life itself. (723)

The concept of a metaphor as a living thing provides an essential insight into the workings of language: the metaphor does not exist simply as a means but as a living entity in itself, and as something alive it produces its own forces and internal meanings as the text progresses. One must learn

to live with the metaphor because of its "touch and go" nature, and toward such living are the exercises herein directed.

Focusing on the imbalance or instability of the metaphor provides a needed and fresh way to perceive the figure beyond a convention assumption that there is a balance of parts. The metaphor has conventionally been taught with an emphasis on the equation in the figure rather than with an emphasis on the instability or the breaking down, but with a shift of emphasis we can perceive such instability as we travel along the line of the breakdown process; in the instability lies the dynamic, the kinetics, the life. Such a shift will help to gauge metaphors not only in poetry but in the rhetoric of daily life. Students can discuss with each other their lists of metaphors from magazine ads and from news magazines, finding the point at which the metaphorical equations break down. How far can one follow the metaphor before it will "cease to yield," as Frost says?

I would add to Frost's observations that the point of breakdown may reveal the point of corporate or governmental patterning of audience thinking. Lest this be seen as a bumptious way to tackle metaphor, I want to state that, yes, the tale is cautionary, but no, I'm not simply saying, "Be precise in usage," as I think Frost is. I'm saying additionally and emphatically that the political weight in a metaphor is worth discovering in these image-laden, metaphor-heavy, newsflash-imbued times. I'm saying that the choice of metaphor is among other things a political and often a *quintessentially* political choice, and learning to read it as such may constitute one of the real opportunities for free speech and, as we may call it, *free listening* as fully cognizant citizens.

At this point, I move the class on to the last three exercises, 4, 5, and 6, wherein the class reads poems of war by three contemporary writers. The class investigates the metaphors, respectively, in contemporary poems by Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Michael

Palmer. There exists a line of metaphorical thinking manifest in contemporary poetry that finds a new urgency to our reading and usage of metaphors to the extent that that activity participates in cognitive and political poetics. I stated above that while the workings of metaphors can be seen to be similar in both political and poetical realms, the intent of the metaphor in the political register is to mollify while the intent of the metaphor in poetic register is to discomfit and thus spur thinking and feeling anew. These three exercises are designed to show this difference in intent. Through each of the poems by Bishop, Plath, and Palmer, the class can continue to examine language at the point of breakdown in metaphor. All three of these poets draw exacerbated attention to the "touch and go" nature of language. These three poets find distinct sites of breakdown, characterized, respectively, by what I'll call pivoting, piled, and disjunctive metaphors.

All three take the Frostian analysis of metaphor into toward and into the postmodern realm. If Frost perceived that the metaphor at some point breaks down, still his own and his contemporaries' metaphors existed on the metaphoric continuum of pre-disintegration, drawing their power from the illusion of wholeness. The three poets here, by contrast, draw power from emphasizing the post-breakup status of the metaphor, further down the continuum where the two parts start not to equal each other. In fact, it may be that the point at which the metaphor might "cease to yield" provides exactly the goal of the most postcontemporary of poets.

In the fourth exercise, then, I introduce Bishop's poem, "Roosters," by reading it aloud to the class. Before students listen to the reading they can be urged to clear their minds and listen to the poem simply for its images, to suspend the more conventional educational mode of attempting to "make sense of" or analyze the meaning or "message" of the poem; perhaps I turn off the classroom lights or ask students to close their

eyes to help prompt the concentration needed during the reading. Part of the point of this exercise is to perceive the nonrational, subterranean effect metaphor has on us. After a first reading of "Roosters," students can be asked to write down the couple or few words or phrases they remember most vividly. After a second reading, they may jot down more. In groups, then, they can compare notes to see if certain words or phrases might be more universally memorable than others. If so, why? How does the poet use these metaphors to gain a visceral power of expression? Can any systems or patterns of metaphors be discerned?

To my ear and eye, Elizabeth Bishop utilizes pivoting metaphors that twist, topsy-turvy, often in the poem's center, so as to highlight the fact that the parts of the metaphor gravitate and regravitate. She achieves this metaphoric gravitation and regravitation in "Roosters" by working assiduously to establish one part of the metaphor's equivalency (the initial thing of the metaphor) only to turn abruptly and compel the reader to see from the vantage point of the other part (what the metaphor posits as the thing equal to the initial part). In the first half or so of "Roosters," Bishop clearly marks the roosters as military forces, from their "cruel feet" and "stupid eyes" evoked in the beginning of the poem to their chests "in green-gold medals," to the proliferating comparisons in the middle of the poem. The roosters are territorial, each screaming, "'This is where I live!'" They are labeled as "'Very combative . . .'" and possess crowns "charged with all your fighting blood." The metaphors have taken on the weight of extended metaphor or conceit. What occurs in the middle of the poem, however, is an extraordinary pivot so as to challenge readers' powers of association and implore them to entertain the notion that the metaphor is a figure that breaks and turns in the course of a poem.

In the middle of "Roosters," Bishop suddenly shifts to the story of St. Peter, in which the rooster is now backgrounded but offered

importantly as an emblem of assuagement rather than mindless militarism. Perhaps the shift prompted some of the infamous revisions proposed by Marianne Moore who, for example, suggested the deletion of both "cruel feet" and "stupid eyes."[11] As Bonnie Costello points out, Bishop reverses the symbolic content of the roosters from bellicosity to Christian forgiveness. I would add that Bishop does it in a snap, with no transition or warning but only the flash-switch, the blinding "pivot," which she offers in a recursive moment in the poem which *is* the pivot and *names* the pivot:

> There is inescapable hope, the pivot;
>
> Yes, and there Peter's tears
> Run down our chanticleer's
> Sides and gem his spurs . . . (38)

Bishop continues by observing that "poor Peter" cannot tell at the time that "those cock-a-doodles yet might bless, / his dreadful rooster come to mean forgiveness." This poem, written during the Nazi invasion of Norway (Dickie 112), delivers a trenchant critique of violence and war as it simultaneously enacts the terms of the wrenched, pivoting metaphor—it twists metaphorically from brutality to mercy through the body of the rooster. To use metaphors in this way is not simply to register irony or paradox, but deliberately to jimmy the very mechanisms of poetry for the purpose of showing the power language holds, the horror of war, the hope of peace. The Bishop metaphor seals, then breaks, the unstated contract

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[11] See, for example, Betsy Erkkila's extended discussion of the relationship between Moore and Bishop as evidenced in "Roosters" and many other poems.

with the reader concerning metaphor-making, and in doing so forms a new understanding.[12]

Almost two decades after Bishop published "Roosters" in 1946, Sylvia Plath's virtuosic "Cut" was published in the 1965 *Ariel.* Startlingly beautiful in its simplicity, "Cut" operates in many ways as a meditation on metaphor-making. It focuses for its entirety upon an act of the speaker's accidentally cutting her thumb while peeling an onion. Sometimes critically maligned as a simple exercise or as a poem that can't find its grounding, it is instead an astute and active work of metaphor piling that accretes multifold comparisons in order to problematize the very act of comparison itself. To broach Plath's "Cut," I read the poem as I do Bishop's "Roosters," but then request that students respond by going through the written poem in front of them on the page, underlining every word or phrase that surprises, astonishes, galvanizes, or in some other way works on the pulse. As a class, then, teacher and students can work through the reasons that these words or phrases operate upon the senses. Are the metaphors commensurate with the experience of the cut described in the poem?[13] Is it responsible to load metaphors like this? Is there justification for it?

"Cut" is remarkable for the way it represents and re-represents that act of metaphorization compulsively, in many layers, each layer identifying a new layer of figuration, the figuration gathering to itself legion meanings

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[12] Bishop operates in this pivoting way in other poems, too, notably in "The Man-Moth," "The Armadillo" and "Brazil, January 1, 1502."

[13] Plath's poem, "Daddy," could serve admirably as a corollary poem for this exercise. In my experience, there is not a student who doesn't see immediately the prodigious risks Plath takes with presenting her personal, psychological experience as a daughter to compare with the victims of Nazi concentration camps.

that are very difficult to sort through completely.[14] The figurations are not, however, random, as some critics have claimed—hardly so. They are precise, sometimes almost bloodcurdlingly so. The verses, upon first reading a jumble of comparisons, reveal with subsequent readings a metaphorical scrolling from cut thumb to pilgrim to turkey to carpet to stepping to pink fizz to champagne to celebration, in a movement hardly capricious[15]:

> Little pilgrim,
>
> The Indian's axed your scalp.
>
> Your turkey wattle
>
> Carpet rolls
>
> Straight from the heart.
>
> I step on it,
>
> Clutching my bottle
>
> Of pink fizz.
>
> A celebration, this is. (13)

The first two comparisons establish, with the mention of Indian and turkey, the context of Thanksgiving, then continue with the mention of red carpet, usually a figure of welcoming, which the speaker steps on. The speaker then celebrates with champagne, again evoking a Thanksgiving context, perhaps, and it may be that the speaker was cutting onions with a kind of celebration in mind. More importantly, though, Plath draws upon the

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[14] These layerings are not unlike an "onion" itself, a curious word--a little like a palindrome with a buried "I" in the center.

[15] Cognitive linguists speak of metaphorical mapping; if one were to map the metaphors in "Cut" it would describe several football game-plan maps, arrows and dashes and circles all overlapping—that is to say, it is extremely complex.

perceived peaceful mythology of New World Thanksgiving to insert and assert the fact of violence between the pilgrims and Indians in the New World colonies, rendering the cut a wound suffered in such a battle. Given these images, the million "redcoats" who run "out of a gap" later in the poem, perhaps representing in an elliptical way red blood cells, represent more directly the history of conflict in the New World, including the American Revolutionary War. In this way Plath prepares the reader for the question in the dead-center of the poem: *Whose side are they on?* (14; emphasis mine).

The question remains paramount to the metaphor-making in the poem, and uses an Bishop-like pivot wherein the poem recursively describes and is the situation of assigning side—of the metaphor, of the conflict. The representation starts with a scalping in the midst of celebration, then turns to the action of the redcoats running out of a wound, we as readers are placed in conflictual "familial" groups: Pilgrim *v.* Indian in the middle of Thanksgiving celebration, and England *v.* American colonies in the nascent United States. Plath compounds the problem of taking sides, moreover, when she continues to set forth opposing sides with fervid, shuffling rapidity, progressing through a kind of compendium of (usually American, usually war) histories, launching from Indians to redcoats to kamikaze man, to the Ku Klux Klan, to a babushka wearer and, in the final verse, to an injured veteran. Hence the pilgrim with the axed scalp near the start becomes, in the last stanza, the "trepanned veteran," probably from World War II, who has undergone head surgery because of a battle wound.

She uses the pivot, but she piles the metaphor equations on. One of the most fascinating aspects of Plath's metaphor piling is that the metaphors include both oppressors and victims who repeatedly change places (Britzolakis 171), operating on either side of the equation. Such

switching wreaks havoc on the unstated contract the poet has with the reader and the metaphor, presenting to the reader new ways of perceiving the metaphorical equation. The proliferation of metaphors underscores the central question, "Whose side are they on?" Does the cut, out of which run a million soldiers, gesture to the wounded or to the aggressors? Does such a distinction actually make sense in war, where so many are wounded, and any side with a soldier dead has lost? This particular Plathian world is not given to Manichean opposites but rather to a world of oppositions that change sides as fast as Plath presents them, violence being shown to breed violence. The poem, "Cut," sees to the heart of the blood source and of the conflict and of contemporary metaphor making; that is, regardless of the assignment of metaphor part (thing, thing equaled, or vice-versa), the damage remains and the damage is paramount—whether characterizing the cut finger as the "trepanned veteran" or "the thumb stump."

I am progressing here to a suggestion that contemporary poetry changes the terms of metaphorization, a process that during or since World War II constitutes a process of highlighting the instability of the equation, whether through Bishop's pivots or Plath's pilings. Finally, as the sixth and final exercise on metaphor, Michael Palmer's poetry demonstrates yet another direction being taken by metaphor-making in contemporary poetry. Palmer's poem, "In an X," vexes the notion of metaphor itself, especially as the poem, in tantalizing ways, positions "X" so as to suggest the designated thing—i. e., that which exists to be represented.

Palmer numbers the lines in his poem to underscore the effect of multiple representations. Examine the first three lines from the poem:

1. I describe this as if it were before me it is not before me.
2. I say it is a picture it is not a picture.

3. I say it is a picture of a thing it is not a picture not a thing it is not a picture of a thing. (Glass 77)

In the first line, the thing, "this"--presumably the "X"--represents something that is both before and not before the speaker. For Palmer, *x* does and does not equal, at the same time, its metaphoric equation. In the second line, Palmer states that the picture may be before the speaker but now it both is and is not a picture, and in the third line he continues the convolutions of metaphoric equations, the rigorous exploration of metaphorical meaning proving energizing and exciting. After the first three lines of the poem, Palmer continues to make assertions of both equality and inequality in the metaphorical equation, but then does a startling thing when the tenth line of the poem appears: "10. I say that I am in pain." With this assertion Palmer seems to deny or at least suspend metaphor-making altogether, the line signifying itself and only itself, refusing to take on the terms of anything else. It proves all the more stark for standing alone. There is a kind of verity to bodily pain, he seems to imply, that resists the very operations of language.[16]

Possible questions to pose to students include the following: Is Palmer's usage of language a departure? In order to engage the difficulties of Palmer's idea of metaphor, which constructions of metaphors found in magazines--and also in Bishop's and Plath's poems—might be most closely allied with Palmer's "In an X," and are there cases in which the metaphors seem to be baldly irrelevant, irreverent, or equivocal? If student's have seen Plath's usage of metaphor as irresponsible, how do

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[16] See, for example, Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, in which she asserts the essential nonrepresentational quality of pain. She argues convincingly that pain is apprehended only in the moment and afterwards is unequal to any representations in language. Scarry's important claim is that this nonrepresentational quality of pain is utilized by power hierarchies in order to justify war.

they perceive Palmer's usages? If they've seen Plath's as powerful, how are Palmer's by comparison? How are metaphors used in advertising copy and news presentation different, politically and ethically, from these metaphors used in poetry? If the intentions are different in mass culture usages as opposed to poetic usages--as they certainly are--then what are the intentions in each?

Palmer is adamant on the subject of language and its betrayals, noting that his view of language was determined in part during the years of the Vietnam War, during which distrust of rhetoric was endemic:

> . . . I was very much operating [in *Notes for Echo* Lake] at the level of sign and how it was, at once, full and empty—how at once within a certain fragile agreement of the tribe it had its referent and yet how the tribe itself was always betraying its referents. Remember, it was also Vietnam behind a lot of this. There's an occulted autobiographical character to *Notes for Echo Lake*, so it takes me back into a period of lies, in an almost Orwellian sense, when we learned that the referential signifiers of those in power were bogus. (cited in Gardner 273)

Palmer further addresses the relationship between war and language, in which the referent is both full and empty, in his poem, "Construction of the Museum." As part of his collection, "Seven Poems Within a Matrix for War," "Construction" concerns the first Gulf War, in 1991, in particular the workings of violence and writing as they move in and out of representation, including each of violence and writing representing each other. A segment from the middle of the poem follows:

> In the hole caused by bombs
>
> which are smart we might find a hand
>
> It is the writing hand

hand which dreams a hole

to the left and the right of each hand

The hand is called day-inside-night
because of the colored fragments which it holds

We never say the word desert
nor does the sand pass through the fingers

of this hand we forget
is ours (Lion 214)

This is a disquieting reading experience, to say the least, informed by the metonymy of the hand as well as the metaphor of hand as dreamer. The last two lines above, perhaps the pith of the poem, direct the reader to political language, how we say and don't say, feel and don't feel, are complicit, even if unconsciously, with political systems, so that we lose track of the writing hand. We never "say the word desert" and never let "the sand pass through the fingers"; these denials engage the reader in a disconnected perception, such as that which will almost certainly allow further Middle East conflict to occur. The conflict occurs according to the logic contained in the disconnection of metaphor parts that become each other. The Palmer poem creates experience incapable of being felt--the sand that doesn't pass through the fingers, the hand we forget is ours. The writing hand during the Gulf War dreams, and also writes, itself into a hole. Palmer positions his parts of metaphors in active disjunction so that they chafe and vex, just like the parts of our experience of atrocities that, as watched on the television and mediated by incessant spin, are both ours and not ours, both equal to and not equal to our sense of self. Palmer's

disjunctive metaphors progress along a line from Bishop's pivoting, and Plath's piling metaphors.

The contemporary poetry I examine here attends more often to the point at which the metaphor chafes, twists, torques, contorts, breaks, broods, reverses, oscillates, disturbs, or disintegrates; it inhabits that flashpoint of disintegration as a way of achieving the poem's greatest and most concentrated integrity. All metaphors break down, as Frost argues. The thrust of my argument, however, depends not upon the possibility of break-down, which is endemic, but upon the nascent perception of the extent to which the contemporary and postmodern metaphor *demands* that the reader dismantle it because it has begun its own dismantling even in the middle of utterance. As Hausman suggests, the tension in the metaphor has "until recently . . . been overlooked or at least minimized" (59) by theorists. The postmodern treatment of metaphor does not operate, of course, in an utterly disintegrative manner consistently across the board, but it does show in particular cases a provocative and startling approach to metaphor-making. As such, the postmodern metaphor provides a ripe and rife area for exploring poetry in the classroom.

Contemporary poets have the means to showcase their figures of speech in such a manner that they may prompt the reader thereby to interrogate the equivalencies (between the thing and the thing-equaled) that seem to be posited by metaphorical language. The contemporary metaphor can be caustic in its operations, discourages reliance upon the comfort of equivalency in metaphorical parts. Contemporary poets call attention to the metaphor that crumbles, often with little tracking needed, as can be seen by particular strategies, including Elizabeth Bishop's pivoting metaphorical structure, Sylvia Plath's metaphor piling, and Michael Palmer's disjunctive metaphors. The poetic techniques of these writers represent, roughly speaking, three successive progressions of

contemporary metaphor-making. The three poets showcase contorting metaphors, metaphors that swallow their own tails, rub and partially elide their metaphorical parts even as they appear. They position each side of the equation in scales that weigh and question the cost. Their utterances are kinetic, their views of language active and dynamic. If the definition of something alive is that it changes, then language is profoundly alive: it moves, alters, transmutes, trashes, reshapes our realities. All in real time.

Palmer refuses to adhere to the traditional equation of metaphor so as to be able to highlight the ways that rhetorical language manipulates the reader/listener/watcher. The difference between political exhortation that attempts to manipulate subconsciously and Palmer's poetry of blatantly vexatious metaphor-parts is sharp, the former remaining largely subterranean and the second calling attention pointedly to the scraping, where the parts of the metaphor no longer cling and adhere but fall away. Political exhortation is meant to stand as truth and Palmer's poetry is meant precisely to unravel such statements posited as truths; his poetry insists upon itself as part of the very tissue that makes up the organism of language. In Michael Palmer's "In a X" and in other poems, the poet follows the *x* to the last ravel, presenting the act of reading as a necessary and political act.

Poetry announces itself as a medium that stirs up language, but political rhetoric, while not exactly a polar opposite to poetry nonetheless does not announce itself as such. In fact, it purposes to be clear and devoid of interlaced meanings. These are extremely thorny problems with answers that are of course still and probably always in the process of being formed in language studies. I count a successful class to be one in which the problems are aptly stated, the living nature of language deeply perceived, and the touch and go nature of metaphor intensely appreciated. Hence, the import of asking questions like the ones above is

paramount in these exercises. Readers detecting such workings of language might come to understand metaphor as a means of "attempting to understand a vital part of who we are and what kind of world we live in" (Kövecses xi). The more the nature of metaphor is observed, the more adeptly the political register can be gauged, weighed, and analyzed.[17] Language is necessarily metaphorical; examination of metaphor, however, is not necessarily automatic.[18]

Near the end of one recent semester I told my students in my classes, "If you take nothing else away with you from this course, take this: Don't let television be your only source of news." By this I meant, of course, ostensibly, to read *Harper's* or *Atlantic Monthly* or even *Newsweek* or *Time*, among other sundry print sources in addition to watching and being unconsciously swayed by soundbites. But I also meant subliminally, several passages down the line of meaning, to read poetry and read it carefully, so that they can ultimately, among the many pleasures of poetry, be aware also of the means by which figures are used to pattern an audience's perception. In saying "source of news" I played on the metaphor, "source," quietly, lightly, but I hope also emphatically: to the extent that you depend upon others (and we all do), let the beginning (source) of your thinking and feeling stream from other people at the

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[17] A few final questions that might be posed to students studying metaphor-making, as a corollary to the six exercises, include the following: What does such a perception of language say about the educational process? What is the job of the teacher in these deliberations about language, and the job of the student? What happens when politicians and spinners make metaphors that remain unexamined by the voting electorate? To what extent is it the voters' responsibility to perceive the point at which the metaphor breaks down? To what extent is examination of language the politicians' or the reporters' responsibility?

[18] Of course, my argument is that without the training by which further examination of metaphorical language usage can be undertaken, the plethora of wounds in Plath's "Cut" will only continue to deepen and grow more widespread—and that that might be part of the point of her metaphor proliferation.

perpetual beginning of their thinking and feeling—that is, poets--and depend upon their processes of thinking and feeling in which every line is fresh, vexed, and questioning as it functions in the freight of language.

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