THE "VANISHING" METAPHOR*

Kayser's description of a type of metaphor as found in Trakl's poetry leads to the interesting concept of "auflösende Metapher", translated by Mooij as "dissolving" metaphors. The metaphor is called "dissolving" or "vanishing" for several reasons:
1. The identification of a primary subject is no longer possible.
2. The relative autonomy of the two domains has disappeared; they are no longer separable, but emotionally unified into a new entity.
3. It becomes impossible to distinguish literal from figurative elements.
4. Differences between the two ideas are neglected and all possibilities of unification exploited.[1]

In this paper I would like to discuss two types of metaphors, both of which seem to fit the description but which are, nevertheless, completely different.

The first type is the kind of metaphor found in poems called in French "paysages intérieurs" where, indeed, we have a real fusion of the principal and the subsidiary subject, as well as a fusion of metaphor and (metaphorical use of the) context. The resultant meaning of this kind of metaphor is always a synthesis, an emotional fusion of a concrete and an abstract element; a fusion called atmosphere. A perfect illustration of this fusion is to be found in the poem *"De profundis clamavi"* by Baudelaire (*Les Fleurs du Mal* XXX).

> J'implore ta pitié, Toi, l'unique que j'aime,
> Du fond du gouffre obscur où mon coeur est tombé
> C'est un univers morne à l'horizon plombé,
> Où nagent dans la nuit l'horreur et le blasphème;
>
> Un soleil sans chaleur plane au-dessus six mois,
> Et les six autres mois la nuit couvre la terre;
> C'est un pays plus nu que la terre polaire;
> – Ni bêtes, ni ruisseaux, ni verdure, ni bois!
>
> Or il n'est pas d'horreur au monde qui surpasse
> La froide cruauté de ce soleil de glace
> Et cette immense nuit semblable au vieux Chaos;
>
> Je jalouse le sort des plus vils animaux
> Qui peuvent se plonger dans un sommeil stupide.
> Tant l'écheveau du temps lentement se dévide!

In the second line we have a metaphorical expression with an abstract and a concrete element. This metaphorical expression is extended in the third and fourth line, where the emotional elements and a concrete landscape are unified into a new entity. Then we have a continuing description of this new entity in the second and third couplet. In these couplets it becomes impossible to distinguish literal from figurative use of language. The whole passage could be taken literally without any difficulty, because in the language there is no clash of literal senses; at the same

time we know that this is not the description of a "real landscape" but of a state of mind. On the one hand the description is a continuation of the extended metaphor of the beginning, on the other hand it is no longer a *metaphorical expression*. Perhaps we might call this continuation a *metaphorical use* of language, like some non-deviant sentences which are metaphors only if we take into account their situational context which gives us "the referent" (the subject spoken about). However, the passage in itself could also be taken literally and the reader is inclined to do so, because of the length and consistence of the passage and because of the fact that "every landschap *is* an atmosphere".

An analogous "vanishing" of the metaphor is to be found in Verlaine's *"Clair de lune" (Les Fêtes Galantes)*

> Votre âme est un paysage choisi
> Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques
> Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi
> Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques.
>
> Tout en chantant sur le mode mineur
> L'amour vainqueur et la vie opportune
> Ils n'ont pas l'air de croire à leur bonheur
> Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune,
>
> Au calme clair de lune triste et beau,
> Qui fait rêver les oiseaux dans les arbres
> Et sangloter d'extase les jets d'eau,
> Les grands jets d'eau sveltes parmi les marbres.

The first line has been called a bold metaphor and clearly it is the focus of the metaphorical expression ("paysage choisi") that is continued in the whole poem. Again it is difficult to locate the metaphor, because a clear-cut metaphorical expression is continued throughout the whole poem. This is probably the reason why Weinrich says that "in a wider sense the whole poem is the metaphor".[2] But at the same time – and just as in the poem of Baudelaire – it seems difficult to take this extended-landscape-description metaphorically, because of the length and consistence of the passage. Furthermore it is remarkable that the described landscape becomes the frame in another metaphorical expression where an emotional element will constitute, in its turn, the metaphorical focus ("sangloter d'extase"). In these poems the interpenetration of abstract and concrete elements takes place by means of their becoming alternatively the focus and the frame, and therefore, indeed, we can say with Empson that now "we are no longer interested in which is the vehicle and which is the tenor; they are on the same footing".[3] These poems illustrate that all possibilities of unification are exploited and the differences are neglected. We could even ask if there are differences any longer. In reading we feel no resistance, because the analogy is so familiar that we do not have the impression of a "false identity."[4] No resistance, probably, because it is a general type of metaphor common to all languages and, as Empson said, "when the vehicle is typified it becomes pregnant by definition."[5]

Still, we have to say that it is not only the fact that the analogy is so usual, that causes the "vanishing" of the metaphor. In the first place the reason has to be found in the linguistic expression of the metaphor. In both poems there are two things which strike us in the presentation:
– First we have the combination of a clear-cut metaphorical expression, followed by a longer passage that could be read consistently in a literal or in metaphorical way. Without the introductory *metaphorical expression*, probably we would not speak of *metaphorical use*. But it is *the length and consistence* which seems to be responsible for a literal reading of this passage.
– Then there is the fact that in the introductory metaphorical expressions the emotional element has been indicated in a very general way ("coeur", "âme"), so *there is no need for precision*, there is no need "to pick out the right elements from the vehicle".[6] Every landscape creating "mood" will do the same thing. A well-known unification is effectuated which has become very common, so that in some cases we incline to speak of extended catachresis. But, indeed, *if* significant details are chosen, inner-landscape poems might show bold metaphors too. In this respect a comparison with two other poems by Baudelaire might be interesting: *"L'Ennemi"* and *"Causerie"* for instance, where metaphors – if not bold – are less vanishing than in the poems mentioned before. In the second and third couplet of *"Causerie"* (*Les Fleurs du Mal*, LV) for instance, the heart is metaphorised in different ways:

> . . . Ta main se glisse en vain sur mon sein qui se pâme;
> Ce qu'elle cherche, amie, est un lieu saccagé
> Par la griffe et la dent féroce de la femme,
> Ne cherchez plus mon coeur: les bêtes l'ont mangé.
>
> Mon coeur est un palais flétri par la cohue;
> On s'y soûle, on s'y tue, on s'y prend aux cheveux!

Here we have the same hesitation caused by the combination of metaphorical expressions followed by metaphorical use, but in this poem the length of the passage used metaphorically is more limited and there are more details which require an explanation. Here we could speak of an extended metaphor, because the extension has not yet started to live its own life. But a borderline case seems to be the poem *"L'Ennemi"* (*Les Fleurs du Mal*, X), where the extended metaphor acquires almost an allegorical character. Take, for instance, the first and second couplet:

> Ma jeunesse ne fut qu'un ténébreux orage,
> Traversé çà et là par de brillants soleils;
> Le tonnerre et la pluie ont fait un tel ravage,
> Qu'il reste en mon jardin bien peu de fruits vermeils.
>
> Voilà que j'ai touché l'automne des idées,
> Et qu'il faut employer la pelle et les râteaux
> Pour rassembler à neuf les terres inondées,
> Où l'eau creuse des trous grands comme des tombeaux.

The other couplets too make a wider application of the metaphorical expression of the first line.

Many symbolist poems could be mentioned, showing the same kind of generalization. I think Kayser is right in explaining the Symbolistic preference for this kind of metaphor by referring to their belief in the fundamental unity of different domains of the world, but I would not agree with him that in these cases "language loses its solidity and begins to slide".[7] On the contrary, it seems that metaphors of this type tend to vanish because they become literal. In nearly every landscape described even without metaphors, we are still used to catching the emotional import, and we do not need metaphors for realizing an "inner-landscape". The fusion is too well-known!

These – more or less – dissolving metaphors seem to be the opposite of bold metaphors. I would rather speak of metaphors difficult to identify. With regard to these metaphors it is difficult to know where the metaphor ends and where the context begins. One could possibly say that these poems show special cases of extended metaphor; very special indeed, because we do not always feel the necessity of transferring, hence we are not always quite sure of the metaphorical character of the extension. Curiously enough, this kind of extension of a basic metaphor is quite natural, but, at the same time, it is this extension that brings about the vanishing of the metaphor.

The other type of metaphor I would like to discuss here, is found in a poem by René Char, and is very typical for some modern poetry.

> *Le Carreau*
> Pures pluies, femmes attendues,
> La face que vous essuyez,
> De verre voué aux tourments,
> Est la face du révolté;
> L'autre, la vitre de l'heureux,
> Frissonne devant le feu de bois.
>
> Je vous aime mystères jumeaux
> Je touche à chacun de vous
> J'ai mal et je suis léger.
> *(Les Matinaux)*

In the poem of Char (a remarkable poem which deserves more attention than I can give it here) the identification of the metaphor is difficult because we do not know the primary subject. One might think that the title and the first lines describe the subject: window-pane, but problems arise with the women mentioned in the first line and especially with the reading of the fourth line which humanizes the face of glass; so does the fifth line which also turns the face of glass into a human face. Still, I am not quite convinced by the critic who assumes that one might conclude that the window-pane of the title is only a metaphor.[8]

The reading of the first six lines gives us two subjects (window-pane and human face) which are equally important and which are both metaphori-

sed. At first sight, the metaphorical expression seems to illustrate the interaction view of Black, but then we have to state immediately that it is a borderline case because the interaction occurs between subjects having "equal prominence"; the interaction is completely bilateral.[9] It seems difficult to speak here of a principal and a subsidiary subject; there are two subjects, both of which preserve their autonomy, and we have two metaphorical expressions combined in one sentence and related to two subjects, eacht seen in the light of the other. The key sentence: "the face . . . of glass . . . is the face of the rebel" shows the essential ambiguity. We do not know which is the focus and which is the frame in this metaphor; rather we must say that both become alternatively the focus and the frame.

This poem seems to be the perfect linguistic illustration of the implications of the duck-rabbit picture, analysed by Wittgenstein and applied to poetic metaphor by Hester.[10] The two subjects are substantially confused by the linguistic ambiguity in the first part which gives us the common form (Gestalt) of two metaphorical expressions in one. Nearly every term in this part of the poem could be interpreted at the same time as a literal and as a figurative element, depending on which of the two subjects momentarily dominates in the interpretation: *Pures pluies* = pure rain, or symbol of purification; *femmes attendues* = women who might possibly give some consolation, or personification of rain; *la face que vous essuyez* = the side you are cleaning, or the human face you are wiping (like Veronica in the Bible); *la face de verre* = periphrasis of a window-pane, or metaphorical attribution to a human face, firm and fragile at the same time; *voué aux tourments* = window-pane that has to endure storms, or human face which endures torments; *est la face du révolté* = is the side that resists (bad weather), or is the rebel's face; *l'autre* = the other side, or the other face; *la vitre de l'heureux* = the window-pane of the happy one, or the face of the happy one; *frissonne devant le feu de bois* = trembles, or shivers in front of the log fire.

The two subjects (window-pane and human face) are looked at from the inside and from the outside. Bipolarity is to be found in every part of the description: a human face of glass has the connotations of firmness and fragility; there are torments and happiness; there is consolation in suffering and fighting and there is shivering (from cold, fear, uneasiness?) in the warmth of the fire. The inside and the outside of a window-pane constitute just one and the same inseparable entity, as well as the inward side and the outward side of the rebel's face. These two-sided entities are interchangeable in this poem, like the four sides of a rhombus (cf. title!). Consequently the poem creates an iconic relationship between the two vehicles and the tenor, showing a geometrical figure which possibly symbolizes that the fundamental unity of human matter and nature is based on duality and reversibility. The person speaking in the second part expresses his feeling of love for the co-presence of the two sides that constitutes the fundamental unity of these entities, called "twin-mysteries".

A generalization is not possible here, nor is a fusion into a new entity; rather we might speak of mutual emphasis by means of a confusing metaphorical ambiguity. This metaphor seems to fit, more or less, Empson's description of "mutual metaphor" which is, indeed, and in spite of the name (Empson takes care to state this precisely) a case of "virtual abandonment of the metaphor previously used", so, in a sense, a case of dissolving metaphor. In this poem there are two vehicles (two extended metaphorical expressions) combined in one, and just as in the example commented on by Empson, the "two vehicles have to combine with each other as well as with the tenor, and an ambiguity of syntax is needed to tie them all up".[11] This very essential and intentional ambiguity is responsible for the confusion of metaphor and context.

Whereas in the first type we saw a *fusion* or *unification* of literal and metaphorical elements, here we are dealing with a *confusion* of literal and metaphorical use of language. Both types illustrate the problem of identification and localization of the metaphor in poetry. In the first type metaphors dissolve, because they are becoming literal, in the second type metaphors vanish into a completely figurative context. The major problem of a great deal of surrealist poetry seems to be that the metaphorical expressions cannot be isolated; *the identification and the explication of the metaphor depend totally on the explication of the whole poem.*

Hence, I fully agree with Ina Loeuwenberg who says: "metaphors seen as sentences are incomplete units".[12] The working of the metaphor in poetry depends not only on the interaction between the principal and the subsidiary subject; rather there is an interaction between all the metaphors and the whole context, and this wider interaction is responsible for implications and attributions asserted or created. This is true for all poetical metaphors, even for those which are cases of "false predication" about a given subject, as, for instance, in the poetry of Francis Ponge. In this poetry the context has the well-known function of determination (it limits and defines the metaphorical expressions) as in standard examples. However, this function is only possible if we have clear-cut metaphorical expressions that can be detached from a literal context which gives us the subject spoken about.

But metaphor in poetry is not always "false predication" about a given subject, as Noulet said, in her explication of the poems of Mallarmé: "it is not the subject that brings out the metaphor, but it is the metaphor that brings out the subject".[13] In some surrealist poetry too, the subject is brought out by the metaphor: in fact by the confusing interplay of metaphorical expressions vanishing in a figurative and ambiguous context.

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Notes

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1. W. Kayser, *Das sprachliche Kunstwerk*, Francke Verlag, Bern 1948, 17e Auflage 1976, cf. p. 124-125. J. J. A. Mooij, *A study of metaphor*, Amsterdam, New York, Oxford 1976, cf. p. 164-167.

2. H. Weinrich, "Semantik der Metapher" in *Folia Linguistica* 1.1967, p. 5.

3. W. Empson, *The structure of complex words*, London 1951, p. 347. Empson analyzes here a slightly different case, a passage from Shakespeare.

4. Cf. for instance, Empson, *op.cit.* p 345: "The stimulus to interpret the false identity ought to come at once from the "psychic resistance" to it, and the combination of these two processes, I am maintaining, is the only equipment we have for absorbing and starting to digest an unexpected metaphor or equation."

5. *Ibidem* p. 334. C˜   ·   ·   ·   ' .   ·' by P. Henle, Univ. of Michigan Press 1958, p. 183: "".¹.   ,   ,   sense produces an absurdity or merely something incongruous, the clash of literal meanings must be felt. If it is not, one of two situations must obtain – either the passage is taken literally without encountering any difficulty and no suspicion of a metaphor arises, or else the figurative meaning is so usual that the reader goes to it immediately."

6. Empson, *op.cit.* p. 334.

7. Cf. Mooij, *op.cit.* p. 165; W. Kayser, *op.cit.* p. 124: "Bei dieser Art der Metaphorik aber fühlt man, wie in der Metapher . . . die Sprache zu gleiten beginnt und ihre Festigkeit verliert."

8. A. Kibédi Varga (*Les constantes du poème*, Den Haag 1963) very properly observes in his analysis of this poem, that the reader has to accept the simultaneity of the two human faces and the two sides of the window-pane. But then Varga continues: " . . quitte, ensuite, à ne voir dans le carreau qu'une métaphore."

9. M. Black, *Models and Metaphors*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York 1962 p. 25-47. To Empson *(op.cit.)* p. 345-346 "equal prominence for tenor and vehicle . . . is of the nature of allegory", but, of course, there is no question of allegory here. Cf. too, Mooij, *op.cit.* p. 166: "But on the basis of the interaction theory, it is only natural that such borderline cases occur since this theory characterizes the interaction between the subjects as essentially bilateral from the outset."

10. M. B. Hester, *The meaning of poetic metaphor*, Mouton, The Hague 1967, chapter III and especially p. 169 sqq.

11. Empson, *op.cit.* p. 349.

12 See Ina Loeuwenberg in "Discussions" in *Studies in Language* 3.2. 1979, p. 234.

13. E. Noulet, *Vingt poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, Droz, Genève 1972, p. 160: ". . . le procédé propre à Mallarmé: non plus tirer le métaphore de l'objet, mais l'objet de la métaphore."