**Similes and the Moving Van of Metaphor**

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Here amongst the other New Athenians, “metaphores” (metaphors) is often seen emblazoned on a van. In modern Greek, it means “movers,” and comes with burly men used to hoisting large pieces of furniture and boxes marked, in vain, “prosoche” (fragile) and “ano meros” (“this side up”). More than once I have almost been run down by the **Moving Van of Metaphor**…

To the Ancient Athenians, too, “metaphero” meant “I carry from one place to another” (thus, “I transfer” something from one place–or one word–to another). I am convinced that when Sylvia Plath wrote her nifty riddle “Metaphors,” she was using the etymology as a pun–pregnancy is, after all, the “carrying” of a child.

In practice, we differentiate between “metaphor” and “simile”, though I suppose simile is arguably a species of metaphor–one that uses “like” or “as” or otherwise is explicit about drawing a similarity (My Love is like a red, red rose), whereas properly metaphor only implies one (my love is a red rose covered in thorns). I think it is sometimes suggested in writing classes that metaphor is somehow superior, being more of an immediate jolt, and that simile is somehow prosey, discursive, dull. ([Here’s](http://poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2007/09/bestiary_usa.html)Rigoberto’s post on metaphor, by the way.)

More and more though I have come to appreciate the complexity and nuance of the simile. I think of metaphor as striking a sympathetic harmony between two dissimilar things–a single pure note. Whereas it seems to me that the simile sets up instead an interesting dissonance that continues to vibrate between them. Or to put it visually, it is as if the simile sets up two pictures before our eyes that we can continually go back and forth between, noting similarities *and* differences, whereas in the metaphor, the image of the metaphor almost replaces the original one it overlays.

This is not strictly true, I know I am simplifying, and I can myself think up all kinds of objections and exceptions here–yet I’m trying to grope towards what it is in the simile particularly that appeals to me. Sometimes the complexity that intrigues me is on the level of the syntax of the sentence , as “like” or “as” is actually going to introduce a whole other clause, not usually the case with a metaphor, which will tend to be more syntactically direct.

No doubt part of the allure of the simile to me is the epic simile, since I seem to have spent most of my adult life immersed in the study of ancient epics of one sort or another (though my own poetry is exclusively short and lyric–will this ever cross-fertilize, I wonder? she muses to herself.) An extended simile has a way of commenting on the text, of offering other possible worlds even. The Odyssey has a surprising way of reversing gender, so that Odysseus might be compared to a weeping woman whose city has been sacked, whose husband has been slain, who is about to enter slavery (something Odysseus has himself perpetrated on others). Whereas Penelope might be compared to a shipwrecked sailor or a king. These extended similes set up a very special kind of dissonance–irony. But they also encourage us to view Odysseus and Penelope as a unit–a husbandwife.

The dissonance and irony of the similes also enable the poet to step back from the work, to suggest disagreement with the mores and codes of the bronze-age heroic world without editorializing. The similes allow for a sort of universal empathy. The housemaids who were conniving with the gluttonous suitors (including that insolent slut Melantho) surely deserve a comeuppance. But hanging? (See Margaret Atwood’s[Penelopiad](http://www.amazon.com/Penelopiad-Myth-Penelope-Odysseus-Myths/dp/1841957984/ref%3Dsr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1195551723&sr=8-2), which all “hangs” by that thread; yet apparently the scene was too gruesome for laureate Simon Armitage to include in his [after-school-special version for Radio Four](http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/classics/0%2C%2C1778957%2C00.html)–we can handle violence in video games, it seems, but not in poetry.) The act fits in with the Homeric world, but the poet takes a step back, turns the camera away for a moment, and instead gives us the image of doves caught in a net, their feet twitching, but “not for long”.

There’s a marvellous poem by Irish poet [Michael Longley](http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/trackListing.do?poetId=3150), “The Butchers” from Gorse Fires, that on first glance seems almost a (lively and vernacular) translation of passages in the Odyssey that deal with the great clean-up of the pollution caused by the slaughter of the suitors. It’s hard to quote from, since it is one great sentence, sprawled over 28 lines. At *first* glance it seems like a translation, as though he has added nothing–but on closer inspection it is rather a condensing of the end of the Odyssey to almost nothing but its amazing similes. (Perhaps it is the syntax of the similes that help keep the great sentence snaking across the lines.)

Odysseus, seeing the need for whitewash and disinfectant,
Fumigated the house and the outhouses, so that Hermes
Like a clergyman might wave the supernatural baton
With which he resurrects or hypnotises those he chooses,
And waken and round up the suitors’ souls, and the housemaids’,
Like bats gibbering in the nooks of their mysterious cave
When out of the clusters that dangle from the rocky ceiling
One of them drops and squeaks, so their souls were bat-squeaks
As they flittered after Hermes, their deliverer, who led them
Along the clammy sheughs, then past the oceanic streams
And the white rock, the sun’s gatepost in that dreamy region,
Until they came to a bog-meadow full of bog-asphodels
Where the residents are ghosts or images of the dead.
(Yes! I love bog-asphodels! It so de-Romanticizes, de-mythologizes the asphodel meadows here. As Robert Graves reminds us in “The Common Asphodel”, the asphodel–though a different plant from bog asphodel–is found all over the Mediterrenean on poor soils, wastelands, and overgrazed lots. Alicia’s arcane etymology of the day: our English “daffodil” comes from “asphodel.”)
More and more I am enamored of the simile and its possibilities–of syntax, dissonance, irony, commentary, complexity, allusion, disillusion. If that’s prosaic, I’m all for it.

**“Metaphors”**

**Sylvia Plath**

I’m a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf’s big with its yeasty rising.
Money’s new-minted in this fat purse.
I’m a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I’ve eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there’s no getting off.