

## Theory of metaphor and aspect seeing

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### INTRODUCTION

In the present paper I am going to discuss a lesser-known, yet by no means uninteresting or unimportant theory of metaphor (Hester 1966; 1967). Although the name of its author, Marcus B. Hester, an American philosopher and aesthetician, does not belong among the most cited in theory of metaphor debates, the renowned French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who wrote extensively on metaphor, praised Hester's theory highly and paid considerable attention to it in his writings (2004, 245–254). The main reason why this account of metaphor is worth noticing is, to borrow Ricoeur's words, "the role it gives the image in the constitution of metaphorical meaning" (266). It is well-known and widely acknowledged that the role images and imagination, perception (or quasi-perceptual experience) and ability to notice similarities play in appreciating metaphors presents a crucial issue for theories of metaphor.<sup>1</sup> Hester focuses on the process of creating and interpreting metaphorical statements in particular and tries to show that this is the place, where language (as a system of rules) and perceptual experience meet.

Another significant aspect of Hester's theory is that he based his explanation on Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of aspect perception (as appeared in the eleventh section of his *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953). This brings us to the second most important reason why it is worth paying attention to this theory: there has been no other attempt to employ Wittgenstein's thought in a theory of metaphor as systematic as Hester's. In spite of its undeniable value, I believe that Hester's theory does not fully exhaust what the Wittgensteinian inspiration has to offer. Its main shortcoming is that Hester does not pay proper attention to Wittgenstein's distinction between the experience of noticing an aspect (so called "aspect-dawning") and continuous aspect perception. In what follows I attempt to show that the lack of this distinction results in quite serious drawbacks on the part of Hester's theory. Tracing this shortcoming, however, offers us an opportunity to instructively present the full potential of Wittgenstein's analysis of aspect seeing for theory of metaphor and also to comment briefly on its place in the whole of Wittgenstein's thought about perception, language and meaning.

## 1. HESTER'S THEORY

At first glance, Hester's account seems quite straightforward. A metaphorical statement joins together two words or phrases that does not quite fit together: the whole does not yield any meaningful proposition – it does not obey valid rules of the current language system. “The metaphorical subject is not, so to speak, absorbed by the subject as it is in a literal statement,” argues Hester (1966, 208). Therefore when we are confronted with a metaphorical statement, our understanding cannot proceed routinely: such a statement is, when taken literally, a case of so-called “semantic collision”<sup>2</sup> Under such circumstances we are forced to turn our attention to individual words joined in the metaphor. These carry with them histories of their uses, and this is our last resort when trying to make sense out of such a statement. However, when we are restrained to this mass of memories we have to take them in their qualitative fullness, since it cannot be determined in advance what detail could be important in relation with the other term present in the metaphorical statement. “The form of ambiguity forces the reader to open his mind to the nest of possible implications or imagery which poetic language has,” says Hester (208). And there lies the source of the experiential, quasi-perceptual nature of metaphorical meaning. Paul Ricoeur speaks about the “quasi-visual” nature of our experience with metaphor and adds that it stands in opposition to literal language where “the arbitrary and conventional nature of the sign separates meaning from the sensible as much as possible” (2004, 247). In other words, where habit and automatism required by practical attitude towards our environment overshadow qualitative fullness of experience, there literal meanings of our words dominate. Concepts are both means and products of this process. Metaphors, on the other hand, block and reverse this.

According to Hester, this situation could be depicted analogically to cases when we experience so-called dual-aspect pictures (pictures with built-in ambiguity, e. g. the famous duck-rabbit head, an example that Wittgenstein – 1953, 194 – uses). Pictures of this special kind can be seen in two different but equally satisfactory ways (e. g. either as a duck or as a rabbit). Similarly, in the case of metaphor, words or phrases joined in the metaphorical statement present two different aspects. The key difference between these two cases, argues Hester, is that in metaphor we lack anything that could play the role of the common graphic substratum (the duck-rabbit drawing taken as a tangle of lines, shapes and colours):

In Wittgenstein's example we are given B [the duck-rabbit figure] and the problem is to see A [the duck aspect] and C [the rabbit aspect]. In metaphor the problem is different though the act of seeing-as is similar. In metaphor we are given A and C and the problem is to see B. B in the duck-rabbit figure is the common Gestalt form between duck and rabbits. In the metaphor B is the relevant sense in which A is like C (1966, 208).

Understanding metaphor, or to put it more aptly, experiencing a metaphorical statement, is a sort of seeing a dual-aspect picture in reverse.

What exactly is going on, according to this view, when one is trying to understand, interpret or rather appreciate metaphor? As was already said, we let our imagination operate under the control of terms joined in the metaphorical statement: we do understand these terms when taken separately, since their lexical meanings are

known to us. “In reading metaphor with openness we let the image auras of A [metaphorical subject] and C [metaphorical predicate] play against each other in order to discover B [the relevant sense in which A is like C],” says Hester (1967, 179). During this act of metaphorical seeing, we pick the relevant pieces of imagery related to each of the words joined in the metaphorical statement. This process comes about in imagination of the interpreting subject. Therefore Hester speaks about the “quasi-perceptual experience”. The way such an interpretation or appreciation of metaphor should proceed cannot be stated generally, since this is an intuitive, experiential act. In Hester’s words, we deal with an “irreducible, primitive accomplishment which either occurs or does not occur” (179). We can try to assist those who are unable to see the given aspect, those who suffer from the so-called “aspect blindness” (Wittgenstein’s term), by directing their attention, giving them more examples and making more comparisons. But there is no general rule or procedure that could guarantee success: “There is no set of rules which will inevitably overcome aspect blindness,” states Hester (179). In other words, metaphor as a case of seeing has an experiential, perceptual core that cannot be grasped conceptually.

In summary, Hester’s theory grows out of an observation that metaphor is a fusion of conceptual understanding and perceptual experience, of sense and sensible or of sense and the imaginary. Metaphor offers a controlled or structured quasi-perceptual experience. Meanings of words joined in the metaphorical phrase structure this experience. To understand what metaphor means we have to “superimpose” meanings of its words one on the other, or, to put it differently, we have to notice a new aspect of the existing, familiar meanings (as if I suddenly recognize a face that I know from my childhood in an aged face of someone whom I could not identify in the first moment).<sup>3</sup> This is a case of Wittgensteinian aspect seeing, argues Hester. And therefore Wittgenstein’s analysis of this phenomenon can help us to better understand what the metaphorical use of language consists in.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF CONTINUOUS ASPECT PERCEPTION

It is no surprise that this seeming inconsistency of seeing-as, its partly experiential and partly conceptual nature, i. e. the focus of Hester’s inquiry, is one of the main reasons that motivated Wittgenstein to pay attention to this phenomenon in the first place. Our ability to change views of aspects of dual-aspect pictures seems paradoxical: it is a case of perceptual experience, a case of seeing, but, at the same time, it seems that it can be influenced by will (I can decide to see it – or to try to see it – this or the other way). But it should not be possible to influence perceptual experience by will; I should not be able to decide what I see (“But how is it possible to *see* an object according to an *interpretation*?” asks Wittgenstein; 1953, 200). Despite this common view, seeing-as is, Wittgenstein tries to show, a case of seeing. It is not a case of having two different interpretations of one visual experience, he argues. I see differently; I see, literally see, two different things. Wittgenstein expresses this observation for example as follows:

Do I really see something different each time, or do I only interpret what I see in a different way? I am inclined to say the former. But why? – To interpret is to think, to do

something; seeing is a state. Now it is easy to recognize cases in which we are interpreting. When we interpret we form hypotheses, which may prove false. – “I am seeing this figure as a ...” can be verified as little as (or in the same sense as) “I am seeing bright red.” So there is a similarity in the use of “seeing” in the two contexts (212).

Another way to show this is the case, i. e. to show that seeing-as is not interpreting, is the following. When someone cannot see in a dual-aspect picture what I see there (suffers from aspect blindness), I can show her a more realistic or unambiguous picture of what is to be seen there. This should direct her attention and help her to get oriented in the drawing. That this strategy usually works means that it is possible to have a picture wherein one of the aspects of the original (dual-aspect) picture is captured more clearly or unambiguously. But in the case of this second picture, no one doubts that it is an instance of *seeing* such and such a thing (in the picture), rather than *interpreting*. Or, to put it conversely, the first case is then no more an instance of interpretation than is the second one. Wittgenstein presents this idea as follows:

How would the following account do: “What I can see something *as*, is what it can be a picture of?”

What this means is: the aspects in a change of aspects are those ones which the figure might sometimes have permanently in a picture (201).

Wittgenstein also clearly saw an affinity between an experience of aspect seeing and acts of understanding language utterances. “For Wittgenstein, the central importance of his investigation of aspect perception lies in the fact that words too can be the focus of aspect perception,” states Stephen Mulhall in his illuminating interpretation of Wittgenstein’s remarks on aspect perception (1990, 35). Hence, this moment intensified his interest in the phenomenon of aspect-dawning and directed his attention towards the relation between these special cases of seeing (and meaning) and ordinary visual perception (and experiencing language meaning):

The importance of this concept [aspect blindness] lies in the connection between the concept of “seeing an aspect” and “experiencing the meaning of a word”. For we want to ask “What would you be missing if you did not experience the meaning of the word?”

What would you be missing, for instance, if you did not understand the request to pronounce the word “till” and to mean it as a verb, – or if you did not feel that a word lost its meaning and became a mere sound if it was repeated ten times over? (Wittgenstein 1953, 214).<sup>4</sup>

However, Wittgenstein himself took the bizarre visual experience (the dawning of aspect – either in visual experience or in the experience of language meaning) to be just a marker of a much wider and more important phenomenon: continuous aspect perception. Wittgenstein explicitly distinguishes between these two in several places in *Philosophical Investigations*. For example when he introduces the duck-rabbit figure, his accompanying comment is the following: “And I must distinguish between the ‘continuous seeing’ of an aspect and the ‘dawning’ of an aspect. The picture might have been shewn me, and I never have seen anything but a rabbit in it” (194). In other words, if I were unable to see the duck-aspect in the drawing, then the picture would be just another ordinary picture of a rabbit to me, not any dual-aspect picture, and my experience with it would not be different from the usual visual experience with

representational pictures (here with pictures of rabbits). It would not present any strange experience of aspect-dawning. Hence the experience the dual-aspect pictures offer is an experience of a transition between two similarly ordinary visual experiences, two moments of similarly ordinary identifications of an object in a picture.

Therefore there is no need to view the aspect-dawning experience as a mystery. It takes place, no doubt, under very special circumstances that are only seldom met; pictures with built-in ambiguity are intentionally designed to allow us to see them in two different but similarly satisfying ways – and that is the reason why these are the most reliable sources of the aspect-dawning experience (even though by no means the only ones). Hence rather than an enigma, this kind of experience presents a rare opportunity to get a deeper insight into the way we as human beings relate to the world at a very basic level: it shows that concepts permeate perception even on the most usual, spontaneous occasions. Therefore continuous aspect perception is no less perception of an aspect than is seeing individual aspects of a dual-aspect picture. As Stephen Mulhall puts it: “We might therefore redescribe the claim that the standard human relationship with pictures, words, and people is one of continuous aspect perception as the recognition that in these respects we encounter the world as always already saturated with human meaning” (1990, 124).

What is confusing in the case of dual-aspect pictures is the possibility of learning to better command the ambiguous nature of the picture: we can practise acquiring a skill in changing aspects so we can recognize them with higher confidence. That seems awkward. The contribution of volition, as we have already observed, appears inappropriate here. “Seeing-as is like seeing in that the aspect is there in the figure, accessible to all normal observers; it is unlike seeing in that it requires mastery of an imaginative technique,” Hester comments (1966, 206). Our basic intuition tells us that we should not be able to change intentionally what appears to us. What is overlooked here, however, is that the aspects we are able to see continuously during our usual visual experience are also acquired: learned and trained. This is also an instance of mastery. It can be even said that the concepts we use with the highest confidence – as if almost automatically – are those we had been training most systematically.

Naturally, it seems to us that in experiencing dual-aspect pictures our perception is influenced by concepts in a way that has no counterpart in our usual perception: others can help me to see an aspect by identifying the type of object I should see in the picture, by mere naming it, by describing it or by pointing at and identifying its parts. Or by comparing it to other, unambiguous pictures of the object I should see there: “I see two pictures, with the duck-rabbit surrounded by rabbits in one, by ducks in the other. I do not notice that they are the same,” Wittgenstein comments on the force of comparison (1953, 195). But it would be a mistake to draw from this observation a conclusion that concepts play a fundamentally different role in the experience of aspect-dawning than in usual perception. If I were unable to see a duck as a duck and a rabbit as a rabbit (either in the picture or in reality) it would not be possible for me to see it in the duck-rabbit picture either. The fact that this is my standard approach to the world is the only reason that the above mentioned strategy can help me to overcome the (initial) aspect blindness. Otherwise it would make no sense to show me

various pictures of ducks and rabbits or to confront me with living animals of these species. To stress the central point of this discussion once more: noticing an aspect (the experience of aspect-dawning) is just a special kind of experience that makes the role concepts play in our ordinary perception clearly visible.

Concepts – in their generality – function in our perceptual experience as an almost natural tendency to recognize individual objects as being of particular kinds: to structure our perception into identifiable things. A concept manifests itself in experience as a habit, as an acquired tendency to see things as standing to each other in relation of affinity or identity.

To sum up briefly, pictures with built-in ambiguity are a very special sort of pictures which are designed to allow us to apply two different concepts to one graphic pattern. These pictures, however, just exploit the universal nature of our visual perception and make it more visible, i. e. they show that training and habit, in other words, concepts, play a significant part in our perception.

### 3. CRITICISM OF HESTER'S THEORY

As was already noted, the main shortcoming in Hester's reception of Wittgenstein's account lies in the fact that Hester reduces all aspect-seeing (or more generally, aspect perception) to the rather exotic experience of noticing an aspect (or aspect-dawning). Hester does nowhere in his writings mention the notion of continuous aspect perception. How does the fact that Hester did not distinguish between aspect-dawning and continuous aspect perception, that was discussed in the previous section, affect his theory? As an answer to this question I will attempt to show that Hester's account of metaphor – designed in direct analogy to dual-aspect pictures – does not actually make room for aesthetic value of metaphorical statements.

The extraordinary nature of aspect-dawning experience – compared to continuous aspect perception – manifests itself as a kind of paradox. This paradox consists in believing that, on the one hand, the identity of an object I observe does not change during the time I inspect it, but, on the other hand, I cannot deny that it appears to me as two different things, as two pictures of two different things. This incongruity results in an impression that the object I observe, the dual-aspect picture for example, changes right before my eyes. Wittgenstein presents this sense of paradox as follows: "The change of aspect. 'But surely you would say that the picture is altogether different now!' But what is different: my impression? my point of view? – Can I say? I describe the alteration like a perception; quite as if the object had altered before my eyes" (1953, 195). Wittgenstein indicates that to get rid of the air of paradox surrounding the experience of aspect-dawning, we have to recognize that this kind of experience combines two different approaches operating with two different sorts of concepts: we identify colors and shapes when we pick out parts of objects or their properties (and we use such concepts when describing a dual-aspect figure taken as a mere graphic scheme or pattern), whereas concepts that matter in the experience of aspect-dawning are concepts that determine an object taken as a whole, as a thing of a certain kind.

If I saw the duck-rabbit as a rabbit, then I saw: these shapes and colours (I give them in detail) – and I saw besides something like this: and here I point to a number of different pictures of rabbits. – This shows the difference between the concepts (196–197).

Therefore this second type of concept cannot be correctly applied to all objects, “whereas colour and shape concepts necessarily apply to all kinds of objects because they determine, as Kant would have said, the concept of an object in general,” as Stephen Mulhall states (1990, 29). And the sense of paradox we feel when experiencing pictures with built-in ambiguity results from experiencing a change of a thing seen while at the same time knowing that none of its properties had been altered.

As we have already seen, Hester understands our experience with metaphorical statements in direct analogy to the experience of aspect-dawning: he depicts an act of interpreting metaphor as a search for a common ground of two aspects brought in by words joined in a metaphorical statement (i. e. we search for an equivalent of the duck-rabbit figure understood as a mere graphic scheme). The problem here, as we have just said, is that the dual-aspect picture (e. g. the duck-rabbit head as a tangle of lines, shapes and colours) is a thing of different kind than duck-pictures (or real ducks) and rabbit-pictures (or real rabbits): we do not need to relate to such a thing (to describe it using only colour and shape concepts etc.) to appreciate both aspects of this dual-aspect picture. That this is the case is more obvious in the example, where I suddenly recognize a face of an old friend in his altered one.<sup>5</sup> In this case there is clearly no need to relate to some neutral description using only shape and colour concepts. Note also how baffled we would be in case we were asked to teach someone to see a dual-aspect picture as a mere graphic scheme. There is no concept of such and such a graphic scheme to be recognized in other pictures. This tangle of lines, shapes and colours is always individual. Therefore there is no possibility of comparison with other renderings of such a thing; there could only exist exact copies of such a thing. It also demands an effort to see an ambiguous picture again as a pure graphic scheme once we recognize a meaningful picture in it.

Hence, the problem with Hester’s too strict analogy between metaphor and aspect-dawning experience lies in incommensurability between aspect-concepts and properties-concepts. Notions of these two kinds simply do not operate on the same level. When we interpret Hester’s view of metaphorical meaning against this background, then the idea that what we are looking for while interpreting metaphor is an equivalent of the duck-rabbit figure understood as a mere graphic scheme reveals as very problematic. It would issue into a thesis that the metaphorical meaning is completely detached from the concepts joined in the metaphorical statement. The main discrepancy between dual-aspect pictures and metaphors is that metaphors, unlike the dual-aspect pictures, are complex units of meaning: we simply cannot not pay attention to all of the words making the metaphorical statement at the same time; but quite the opposite is true about dual-aspect pictures, since we can see only one aspect of such a picture at one time. We do not keep the duck-picture and the rabbit-picture in mutual tension while observing the duck-rabbit figure. But this is precisely the case with words forming a metaphorical statement. Or to view the difference from yet another angle, no one expects (and rightly so) that pictures with

built-in ambiguity and our experience with them would produce new concepts with new meanings. They simply utilize the existing concepts in the most ordinary fashion; either I see a perfectly trivial picture of a duck in the duck-rabbit figure or I see a similarly trivial picture of a rabbit in it. One picture of one animal each time. The very opposite is true of metaphors: although we use concepts to create the metaphorical statement, it is a very unusual use of the concepts – it does not follow valid grammatical rules. Since only together they create a unit of meaning, it would make no sense to pay attention to individual “aspects” of a metaphor separately. Therefore it is a well-founded expectation that a new meaning might arise through metaphorical language. The metaphorical (creative or aesthetic) phase of language use is vital for language growth, even though this stage has to be overcome if new meaning is about to become a regular part of language. This is actually something that Hester himself acknowledges: “[M]etaphorical transference is a process which operates in ordinary language growth and a change in language is a change in the way the world is conceived. Almost every word will show a metaphorical origin if its etymology is studied” (1967, 215). However, this claim is in tension with his view of what an interpretation of metaphor consists in.

In short, the experience of appreciating a metaphor cannot be viewed as a simple case of aspect-dawning.<sup>6</sup> When we enjoy a dual-aspect picture, we simply follow existing habits, apply concepts according to existing rules: we switch between two aspects both of which could be perceived continuously. This also explains the fact that it is impossible to see a duck and a rabbit in the duck-rabbit figure at the same time. The figure was intently designed to allow us to apply similarly straightforwardly both of the concepts: to see it either as a duck or as a rabbit. Since we can identify both animals in the figure with the same confidence these simply exclude each other. On the other hand, when we deal with a metaphor, we are forced to overcome our habit and to try to fuse together two concepts that usually do not appear joined together in one phrase. Such a task and the resulting experience deserves to be called an aesthetic experience. And that is something Hester himself would approve, given that he characterizes poetic language as ambiguous and opening the reader’s mind to “the nest of possible implications or imagery” (1966, 208).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, the following classical contributions to the modern debate concerning theory of metaphor (Richards 1965; Black 1962; Henle 1959; Beardsley 1962; Davidson 1978).
- <sup>2</sup> This moment had been stressed mainly by Beardsley who coined the term “semantic collision” or “logical absurdity” in relation with metaphor (1962). Ricoeur also acknowledged importance of this initial stage in the process of appreciating metaphor. Ricoeur, however, unlike Beardsley, highlighted in addition a role played by imagination and resemblance in this process (2004, 104–116).
- <sup>3</sup> “I meet someone whom I have not seen for years; I see him clearly, but fail to know him. Suddenly I know him, I see the old face in the altered one. I believe that I should do a different portrait of him now if I could paint” (Wittgenstein 1953, 197).
- <sup>4</sup> In the German original *Philosophische Untersuchungen* Wittgenstein uses as an example the German word “sondern” that can be used either as a verb (meaning “to separate” or “to discern”) or as a conjunction (“but”).

<sup>5</sup> See footnote no. 3 here.

<sup>6</sup> It must be noticed, however, that Wittgenstein gathers quite diverse kinds of experience under the heading of aspect-dawning: on the one hand there are classical dual-aspect pictures, on the other he mentions repeating a word ten times over and separating the sound from meaning in result. These are quite different cases as far as the application of concepts is taken into account. Since Hester is unequivocally relating to dual-aspect pictures in his theory, I will leave these other cases of aspect-dawning aside.

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M. B. Hester. L. Wittgenstein. Aspect seeing. Seeing-as. Theory of metaphor. Aesthetic value.

The present paper aims at elucidating the conceptual architecture of Marcus B. Hester's theory of metaphor. This theory is fundamentally based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of aspect perception (as appeared in the eleventh section of his *Philosophical Investigations*). On the one hand, Hester's theory is worth noticing for the emphasis it gives to imagination (or quasi-perceptual experience) in the process of appreciating metaphorical statements; on the other hand, however, it does not properly interpret the chosen Wittgensteinian inspiration. Its main shortcoming, as I try to show, is that Hester does not pay adequate attention to Wittgenstein's distinction between the experience of noticing an aspect (so called "aspect-dawning") and continuous aspect perception. This flaw then results in such an account of metaphor that actually does not make room for aesthetic value of metaphorical statements. Such a result would be unacceptable for Hester himself, since poetic metaphor was in the centre of his attention, but the problematic assumptions responsible for it went unnoticed by him.

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