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Image Metaphors in Thoreau's Descriptions of Nature

Abstract: While metaphor constitutes one of the most important phenomena studied by cognitive semantics and cognitive poetics, one specific type of metaphor, the so-called image metaphor, receives little attention in cognitive theory and research. Image metaphors are quite frequent in poetry and prose, especially in descriptions of the natural world. They are markedly different from conventional conceptual metaphors and entrenched metaphorical expressions found in everyday language, as they do not involve a more tangible source domain and a more abstract target domain. In an image metaphor, both the source and the target are specific physical entities. Unlike conceptual metaphors, which help people to conceptualize, reason and talk about abstract concepts and ideas in terms of more tangible domains, image metaphors serve entirely different purposes. They emphasize certain similarities between various entities or they create such similarities. The article presents a small part of my study of image metaphors in descriptions of nature in Thoreau's writings. It focuses on image metaphors in two of his later, less known and discussed texts: the essay "Autumnal Tints" and his last manuscript called "The Dispersion of Seeds." Thoreau uses image metaphors in order to point out that the natural world is full of likenesses and universal patterns or in order to defamiliarize ordinary phenomena which he describes.

Keywords: Thoreau, nature, metaphor

1. Image metaphors in cognitive poetics

Cognitive research on metaphor typically constitutes an attempt to discover conventional conceptual metaphors. A conceptual metaphor links two distinct cognitive domains, a source (usually more concrete) and a target (usually more abstract), connected by means of mappings, which are typically considered to be unidirectional: the rich structure of the concrete source domain is transferred onto the abstract target domain. Such a conceptual metaphor can serve as a basis of a large number of metaphorical expressions, each based on some of those available mappings (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999). Conceptual metaphors give rise to conventional metaphorical expressions used in everyday language but also to

more creative metaphors encountered, for example, in poetry, which are considered to be their more innovative modifications, extending, elaborating, questioning, or composing the conventional metaphors: “Poetic thought uses the mechanisms of everyday thought, but it extends them, elaborates them, and combines them in ways that go beyond the ordinary” (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 67). Proponents of Conceptual Metaphor Theory typically claim that concrete source domains provide rich structure for abstract target domains, which lack or have very little structure of their own (the strong version of the so-called Invariance Hypothesis). Even if abstract domains really had no inherent structure, which is questioned by some critics of the theory, such as Haser (2005) or Pawelec (2005, 2006a, 2006b), still there would remain numerous metaphors in which the targets are not abstract and have very clear structure of their own.

The term “image metaphor” is used to refer to a metaphor in which both the source and the target are physical entities, where one concrete entity is compared to another concrete entity because they both possess one or more similar qualities available to sensory perception. The likenesses that form the basis of image metaphors (many of which take the linguistic form of similes) involve one or more physical qualities. The most common include a similar color, shape, sound, manner of movement, environment, configuration of entities (thus, they are not limited to visual qualities, as the term “image metaphor” might misleadingly suggest). Obviously, such pairings of entities may involve more than one likeness: similarities in color, shape, and/or configuration can occur together, as well as an analogical manner of movement may be connected with the same environment.

According to Kövecses (2002: 69), conceptual metaphors in general may be based on “objective, preexisting similarity” as well as “nonobjective similarity.” There are metaphors which are not created on the basis of objective, preexisting likenesses but “generate” what he terms “perceived similarities” (Kövecses, 72). The resemblance motivating image metaphors may be of both kinds: it may involve preexisting similarities (e.g., the same color) or perceived ones (e.g., shapes which may be viewed as alike to some extent, even though the resemblance is partial and difficult to notice if not pointed out by means of a metaphor or simile).

Whereas entrenched conceptual metaphors and conventional metaphorical expressions studied by most cognitive linguists exhibit clear and irreversible directionality from the physical source to the abstract target, image metaphors lack inherent directionality. While each image metaphor has a source and a target, the directionality may easily be reversed, and the source domain may become the target domain and vice versa. The difference between irreversible conventional conceptual metaphors and reversible image metaphors can be explained in terms of domain structure. If abstract domains lack inherent structure and the task of conceptual metaphors is to provide it by means of mapping (parts of) the definite structure of a physical domain onto the abstract one, then obviously the direction of the mapping cannot be reversed. Image metaphors, in contrast, involve images

of two physical objects or phenomena with their own clear structure, which do not need to borrow structure through metaphors, and hence the possibility of their bidirectional character.

Lakoff and Turner (1989) devote only several pages to image metaphors, even though they are abundant in poetry. They mention the fact that apart from conceptual metaphors “there are also more fleeting metaphors which involve not the mapping of concepts but rather the mapping of images” (89). However, no detailed theoretical account of how they work is offered. They are simply defined as partial mappings of one particular image onto another one: “Metaphoric image-mappings work in just the same way as all other metaphoric mappings — by mapping the structure of one domain onto the structure of another. But here the domains are mental images,” one being “mapped onto another by virtue of their common structure” (90). An image metaphor may additionally involve mapping knowledge and/or evaluation of the source entity onto the target entity (Lakoff and Turner, 92).

On the whole, image metaphors receive little attention in Conceptual Metaphor Theory because they seem isolated, idiosyncratic, and thus incidental rather than systematic, as well as unconventional and literary, and therefore not amenable to analysis in terms of conventional conceptual metaphors underlying everyday language. Lakoff and Turner appear to suggest that image metaphors are not as useful and indispensable as conventional conceptual metaphors: “The proliferation of detail in the images limits image-mappings to highly specific cases. ... image-mappings characteristically do not involve the mapping of such rich knowledge and inferential structure” as typical conceptual metaphors do, and they “are not involved in daily reasoning” (91). Lakoff and Turner fail to consider other possible roles that image metaphors may play.

2. Image metaphors in Thoreau's later writings on nature

On the basis of an analysis of image metaphors in some of Thoreau's texts, we can see that they perform at least two important functions in descriptions of the natural world: he uses them to emphasize the unity of nature and its universal patterns and/or to defamiliarize ordinary views and phenomena. As presenting a comprehensive study of image metaphors in Thoreau's writings is beyond the scope of a single article, it focuses on two of his later, less known and discussed texts: the essay “Autumnal Tints” (published in *Wild Apples and Other Natural History Essays*) and his last manuscript called “The Dispersion of Seeds” (published in *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings*).

Thoreau repeatedly relishes the discovery that “nature is full of observable and significant likenesses” (McIntosh 1974: 121). This search for likenesses in nature, in different organisms and natural objects, makes him alert to even unobvious

similarities found throughout the natural world¹ and results in a great number of image metaphors. Thoreau looks for unifying patterns in nature, a couple of practical, useful and versatile designs, several typical natural forms which many different entities assume. He wants to demonstrate to his readers that “particular natural phenomena yielded encompassing laws or patterns” (Robinson 2004: 24). His technique is “so to shower our minds with images of the unity of nature that we will share his belief in the possibility of that unity out of sheer imaginative response” (McIntosh, 122). To achieve this, he employs numerous image metaphors in his writings. Sometimes various image metaphors describing the same phenomenon appear in a single passage or essay.

When distinct entities are presented as more specific examples of the same schematic form, they can be considered to belong to the same category. Thus, Thoreau presents a vision of nature in which “even the fundamental categories by which we begin to arrange scientific knowledge — such as divisions of animal, vegetable, and mineral — are artificial” (Golemba 1990: 131–132). He attempts to overcome the limitations of compartmentalized scientific classification by means of image metaphors, which cross those boundaries and establish connections between what appears separate. The metaphors contribute to a vision of interconnected nature. As Clark (2011) suggests, “metaphorical language can transgress rigid, ‘literal’ demarcations between one thing and another to suggest levels of intuited interrelation that a more narrowly rationalistic and atomistic mode of perception would block out” (20–21). By pointing out similarities, image metaphors forge numerous links between distinct scientific categories, which divide the natural world into various species and natural phenomena. As a result, all entities, animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, begin to be perceived as belonging to an all-encompassing category. Instead of a compartmentalized presentation of the reality provided by science, Thoreau offers a unified vision of nature in which those artificial boundaries disappear.

Image metaphors occur already in Thoreau’s earlier writings, such as *Walden*. The description of “sand foliage” produced in spring by thawing sand demonstrates the main tendencies visible in Thoreau’s use of image metaphors. He observes how wet, melting sand acquires organic shapes: “As it flows it takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines” or lichens (197). The foliage metaphor is already foreshadowed in his first essay on nature, “Natural History of Massachusetts” (also published in *Wild Apples and Other Natural History Essays*). In this case, it is “ice foliage,” the crystals of ice that cover branches of trees in winter and take the form of leaves: “Every tree, shrub, and spire of grass ... was covered with a dense ice-foliage, answering, as it were, leaf for leaf to its summer dress. ... It struck me that these ghost leaves, and the green ones whose forms they assume, were the creatures of

¹ Examples of such unobvious similarities include those between seeds and insects or fish or between trees and clouds or smoke (discussed below).

but one law” (20). In both instances, the same law seems to operate and, as a result, inanimate and animate matter alike fills the same form or mould and acquires identical shapes.² The directionality of the metaphor in *Walden* is soon reversed, as leaves, in turn, are compared to the flowing sand: “Each rounded lobe of the vegetable leaf, too, is a thick and now loitering drop ... and as many lobes as it has, in so many directions it tends to flow” (199). All the image metaphors in this long passage, involving inanimate matter, plants, and animals, including humans, and constantly shifting in their source-target directionality, create an impression of essential similarity and unity of all natural forms. All of them, conforming to certain universal patterns, are seen as emerging from the same life-giving earth.

In his last manuscript called “The Dispersion of Seeds” Thoreau repeatedly introduces image metaphors which point out similarities between seeds and various animals, especially birds and insects. Such metaphors, in addition to suggesting the idea of universal patterns across different realms, serve to animate these seemingly uninteresting, inert parts of plants, which frequently go unnoticed. For example, he describes the scales of white birch cones as “having the exact form of stately birds with outspread wings, especially of hawks sailing steadily over the fields” while the birch seeds have “a very broad transparent wing on each side and two little dark brown persistent styles in front, just like an insect with its antennae. They may pass for tiny brown butterflies” (42). There is also a similar description of keys of the white maple, each consisting of a pair of winged seeds, “with veined inner edges to the wings like green moths, ready to bear off their seeds. ... a thin membrane, in appearance much like an insect’s wing, grows over and around the seed while the latter is being developed within its base” (50). Thoreau’s metaphors emphasize the observation that because these animals and seeds must be able to fly in the air, they resemble each other in their shapes and appearance as well as in their overall manner of movement.

While analogies in shape and motion constitute a transparent motivation for image metaphors, they are not indispensable. In a passage on pitch pine cones and the seeds they contain, a cone is presented as a cage and seeds as birds that, once released from it, will fly away to other places: “A very thin membrane or wing ...

² Thoreau’s image metaphors, as well as his continuous search for natural laws, patterns, principles, were inspired by Goethe’s *Italian Journey*, where he described his “theory of the leaf as the fundamental botanical form” (Robinson, 43). Thoreau, however, “extended Goethe’s principle of the leaf as nature’s basic unit to the inorganic as well as the organic world” (Robinson, 42). Goethe’s idea also appealed to Emerson, who wrote: “every part of a plant is only a transformed leaf to meet a new condition; ... a leaf may be converted into any other organ” (quoted in Richardson 1986: 30). For Emerson, nature is the symbol of spirit and natural phenomena symbolize spiritual ones. The theory of correspondence, which establishes a close connection between nature and its observer, was that aspect of transcendentalism which especially appealed to Thoreau, forming the basis of many of his metaphors. Those metaphors, however, involve a concrete source domain (nature) and an abstract target domain (spirituality, morality, human psyche), unlike image metaphors, which are the focus of this article.

extends from one end of each seed, which it clasps in its divided extremity like a caged bird holding the seed in its bill and waiting till it shall be released that it may fly away with and plant it" (25). In contrast to the previous examples, the metaphor is not motivated by similarities in appearance. Unlike birds or insects, pine seeds have single wings, which do not grow in pairs, like maple seeds, but develop separately under the scales of the cone. Moreover, in this passage the wing of the pine seed corresponds rather to the bird's beak, in which the seed can be held. The metaphor, then, is not based on similar shapes but analogical functions: a bird can hold a seed in its beak and fly away, and so can the wing of the pine seed. Searching for a still better image metaphor for pine seeds, Thoreau finally compares them to fish:

They remind me most, after all, of some deep-bellied fish — an alewife or shad — with their flanks and a tail curving to this side or that, the whole of whose flexible body is a sort of wing or fin fitted not for the varied and prolonged flight of birds, but to steer and assist its course in the stronger or grosser current in which it floats — schools of brown fishes which perform this short migration annually. (25)

This metaphor, in turn, is motivated by the similar shape of the seeds and the fish, and even though they move in two distinct elements, air and water, still their motion can be seen as analogous in some respects: both the fish and the seeds travel together in groups at a specific time of the year. In addition, in this passage the whole body of a fish is likened to a wing. The manuscript abounds in such multiple metaphors employed to describe a single entity or process.

The same tendency to multiply various image metaphors in descriptions of a single phenomenon is one of the characteristic features of "Autumnal Tints," which is probably Thoreau's most metaphorical essay. It contains a huge variety of different types of metaphors but is especially rich in image metaphors, through which colorful fall leaves are constantly construed in new ways and compared to innumerable natural entities and phenomena. Thoreau observes that leaves of various species of trees, with their different colors, resemble distinct varieties of apples: "The leaves of late red maples, still bright, strew the earth, often crimson-spotted on a yellow ground, like some wild apples" (121), while scarlet oak leaves are "the ripest fruit of the year; like the cheek of a hard, glossy red apple" (135). However, the analogy is motivated not merely by similar colors but also by the general pattern of life cycle, which comprises the animal realm as well:

the change to some higher color in a leaf is an evidence that it has arrived at a late and perfect maturity, answering to the maturity of fruits. ... But as the perfect-winged and usually bright-colored insect is short-lived, so the leaves ripen but to fall. Generally, every fruit, on ripening, and just before it falls ... acquires a bright tint. So do leaves. (110)

The passage brings out likenesses between leaves and fruits: growing on trees, gradually changing their color from green to yellow or red, and finally falling down. All these correspondences are easily perceived and accepted by the reader. More unexpectedly, Thoreau extends the concept of ripeness from fruits to leaves.

Even though the idea of the ripeness of leaves is only metaphorical (ripening fruits become richer in nutritious substances, while leaves in fall lose them and return them to the tree), leaves and fruits are in fact very closely related from the biological point of view: flowers are modified leaves, and fruits developing from them are transformed leaves. The more general concept of maturity as the final, perfect stage of development is further reinforced by an analogy with insects, such as butterflies, which, like fruits and leaves, are most beautiful and colorful during the brief last stage of their lives. The description, apart from pointing out correspondences between the different natural entities and phenomena, enhances the positive evaluation of fall leaves. As Thoreau observes, ripe fruits are valued, whereas fall leaves, being useless for humans, are often associated with death and decay only. Extending the concept of ripeness to leaves enables him to transfer positive connotations to them.

The stages of the life cycles of various organic forms, apart from resembling each other, are often conventionally associated through metaphors with stages of other natural cycles, such as the year and the day. In "Autumnal Tints" all those metaphors are condensed in a single statement: "As fruits and leaves and the day itself acquire a bright tint just before they fall, so the year near its setting. October is its sunset sky; November the later twilight" (111). Thoreau emphasizes the similar visual qualities of all these temporal cycles: the striking and rapid transition from the most vivid, beautiful colors acquired toward the end of each cycle to the dulllest and gloomiest ones at the end. In addition, the emphasis on "falling" and "setting" suggests one more common feature: the downward movement of fruits, leaves, and the sun. The complex metaphor constitutes an attempt to combine all natural cycles into a single, universal pattern.

All image metaphors rest on some kind of resemblance between different entities and thus emphasize similarities between them. However, while some image metaphors are based on undeniable likenesses, others create rather than point out similarities and thus offer new ways of looking at the described phenomena, increasing the reader's interest in them. Such metaphors give expression to the writer's unique perception and experience of nature. As Richardson observes, "Thoreau thought of metaphor and simile not as ornament but as a way to bring personal experience into one's writing" (95). Thoreau himself believed that an apt simile could evoke a vivid image in the reader's mind, close to that produced by actually perceiving the described phenomenon, "such distinctness in the conception as only experience could have supplied" (Thoreau's journal, quoted in Richardson, 95).

Many of Thoreau's metaphors and similes point out striking resemblance between radically different elements of nature, which he pays attention to but which normally remain unnoticed. Such metaphors make the reader see things in new ways, provoking alternative perception of familiar natural surroundings, to which little attention is paid in everyday life. Such creative metaphors result from an unconventional

way of looking at things and may lead others to altering their perception of the world as well. “Metaphor makes us look at the world afresh” (Punter 2007: 9); it challenges the reader’s ingrained ways of perceiving and imagining the world.

For example, in “Autumnal Tints” Thoreau employs various metaphors to present the fall scenery in new ways, as an unusual and intriguing spectacle. Some of the metaphors compare the trees and their leaves to various atmospheric phenomena and effects of light. Brightly colored trees are “like yellow and scarlet clouds” (119) in the sunset sky, then the leaves that begin to fall down from them are likened to rain: “the leaves come down in denser showers than ever ... making a sound like rain” (121), and finally the thick carpets of leaves, lying each below its tree and preserving their overall outline, are perceived as their shadows: “I first observe the trees thus flat on the ground like a permanent colored shadow” (121). These metaphors and similes creatively explore possible resemblance between the radically different realms and phenomena in terms of color, shape, configuration, or sound.

Another metaphor Thoreau uses is more conventional, but it is elaborated in an interesting and consistent way. The leaves, with their intensive warm colors, are compared to “yellow, scarlet, and crimson fires, of all tints” (118). The analogy includes the gradually increasing intensity of brightness: “They have been kindling their fires for a week past, and now generally burst into a blaze” (133). Both phenomena finally end in the disappearance of vivid colors, with leafless trunks and branches likened to smoke rising from smouldering ashes: “trees here and there all bare and smoke-like” (121).

In still another metaphorical construal, the trees are perceived as flowers. The phenomenon of leaves turning red in fall is described as “the blossoming of the scarlet oak, — the forest-flower” (135), and the oaks with their red leaves, scattered among green pines, look “like huge roses with a myriad of fine petals” (134). Thoreau encourages his readers to turn away from cultivating and admiring small plants in gardens and to appreciate the fabulous garden of the world, full of gigantic wild flowers: “the whole forest is a flower-garden, in which these late roses burn, alternating with green” (135). This metaphor may be reminiscent of the conventional metaphor, dating back to colonial times, of entire America as a huge natural garden, the New World as a new Garden of Eden, a new paradise, the land of natural beauty and abundance. What is special about Thoreau’s celebration of fall scenery, however, is the characteristic multiplication of various image metaphors, some conventional and some original, each suggesting a slightly different construal of the described landscape.

3. Conclusion

While metaphors in general constitute one of the most important phenomena studied by cognitive semantics and cognitive poetics, image metaphors, which are frequently encountered in literary texts, receive little attention in cognitive theory

and research, probably because they are markedly different from conventional conceptual metaphors and entrenched metaphorical expressions found in everyday language, which are the focus of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Unlike conceptual metaphors, which help people to conceptualize, reason and talk about abstract concepts and ideas in terms of more tangible domains, image metaphors serve entirely different purposes. Basically, they emphasize similarities between various physical entities or they create such similarities, and they can be employed by writers to achieve various more specific effects. For instance, Thoreau frequently uses image metaphors in his descriptions of nature in order to stress the unity of nature and point out that the natural world is full of likenesses and universal patterns or in order to defamiliarize ordinary phenomena through vivid descriptions.

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