

The “Is,” the “Like,” and the “And” - Hemingway’s Hills Like White Elephants

William Mastin

Spring, 2023

1. Philosophical Lumber

Before making a study of Hemingway’s story, it will be prudent to introduce some philosophical material to aid in our analysis.

Before continuing, let us recall Deleuze’s conception of the virtual and of virtual objects—this will be crucial to our discussion of metpahor, simile, and conjunction. In his *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze states his conception of the virtual: DELEUZE REAL MINUS ACTUAL. It is in the space of the virtual that what Deleuze calls intensities, these being ???, can vary and fluctuate, thereby altering the nature of the interaction between the subject and the object. That is, the virtual is the space that exists in between Deleuze’s field of difference and the space of the actual. The virtual is the space that allows the nature of the object to flow and fluctuate without the object changing in actuality. One may think of these fluctuating intensities as akin to changing probabilities; the likelihood of certain modes of perception, use, and perspective of an object change, as governed by their changing intensities.

Let us now conduct a small study of metaphor, simile, and conjunction: the “is,” the “like” and the “and.” Let us have two linguistic objects, x and y . We may connect these terms with the metaphor (x is y), the simile, (x is like y), or with the conjunction (x and y). All three of these devices deisolate x and y , bringing both terms into the same space. This space is not the space of actuality, of course. None of the three statements above give any *actual* information about x or y . Indeed, in the case of the metaphor, we must note that, in actuality, the statement x is y is a false statement; the equating of x and y removes any possibility of any distance whatever between the terms. Since there is such a clear difference between the terms, the metaphorical statement, when read in the space of actuality, is false. And yet, though these statements may be said to be poorly stated or even incoherent (when read in the actual space), we must note that all three are intelligible, evocative, and even informative. Where do these capacities exist, if not in actuality? They are certainly elements of the real. It does not seem far fetched, then, to locate these statements of “is,” “like” and

“and” in Deleuze’s virtual space—or, if not, in a space nearly indistinguishable from the virtual. More will be said about these statements as virtual object in the pages that follow, but for now let us move along to an analysis of what these statements *do*.

Let us begin with metaphor. As the etymology of “metaphor” contains both “process” and “result,” we must ask: under what process does metaphor operate, and what is produced by that process? To take our example: x is y . For this metaphor to have aesthetic value, or any significance *as* a metaphor, the terms x and y must be quite dissimilar. ORTEGA ON DISTANCE It is of little use to metaphorize, for example, “oranges are grapefruits.” Though oranges are, clearly, not grapefruits, the two terms are too similar too each other for the metaphor to make any difference. Statements of the form x is y , where x and y are too near each other, cease to exist in the realm of metaphor and move into the realm of incorrect fact. The two terms of a metaphor must be sufficiently different as to provide a hole in the page for the eye to trip over. ORTEGA DECREATION. What, then, is the meaning of the phrase x is y , when not only is x *not* y , but x and y are clearly and obviously different? What must be realized is that when such an equivalence is drawn, the created thing is *not* simply the pairing of x and y , but is rather a new object altogether. That is, the metaphor does not compare so much as it creates. When [author] writes [metaphor], [author] is not attempting to make a bizarre, counterfactual statement about [term1] and [term2], but is rather melding [term1] and [term2] to produce the new linguistic object signified by “[term1] is [term2].” Ortega y Gasset, in *An Essay in Esthetics by Way of a Preface*, describes this process quite well: ORTEGA LAVA QUOTE. This is quite an apt metaphor to speak about metaphor with. Two directly opposing forces The metaphorical object is, then, a *new* creation. True, it was produced by the combination of x and y , but it is not comprised of or determined by x and y . As in a chemical reaction, x and y react with each other, to produce a new synthesized object.

Now, what is the nature of our newly created metaphorical object? Most importantly, it is *created*. Its process of creation is ended, past. LEVINAS STAMP QUOTE. This is not to say that the metaphorical object is static or constant, as stone seems to be, but only that its being does not slide or turn. It is every bit as rich as the objects it was created out of: it admits of the possibility of interpretation, it keeps secrets, it recedes from our view. But it is, in a fundamental sense, remains as it is and cannot be altered. It is determined, completed, constituted. There is no more to be added to it. Once the metaphor is stated, the object it creates becomes an object for observation, not for alteration. But the metaphorical object is also entirely new; it has not been previously signified. One may say that it did “exist” before the artist signified, but this must be taken as a hidden or undiscovered existence. What then, can we say about a linguistic creation that, though entirely new, is dead as soon as it has been born? Simply this: metaphor opens a space between x and y , a space in language, for a brief moment, allowing something truly new through the gap before allowing language to snap shut once more before severing the connection

between x and y . ORTEGA FOOTNOTE 3.

The simile, though often regarded as either a “special case of metaphor” or as that thing which aspires to the heights of metaphorical language, is a process distinct from metaphor. We may note this distinction in several ways. First, we note the ambiguity of the statement “ x like y .” In what way is x like y ? Under what criteria? The simile provides no answer to these questions, nor does it provide a definite path to an answer. This is a distinct quality of the simile, separate from both the metaphor and the conjunction: the “is” of the metaphor is definite and assertive, allowing no space for questioning. Either x *is* y , or x is *not* y . There is no space for similarity in the metaphor: the question “in what way is x , y ?” is meaningless. Conversely, the conjunction makes no pretensions to similarity or equality whatever. “ x and y ” draws no connection between x and y , save that they exist in the same space. The conjunction, though quite inactive, is just as definite as the metaphor, in a negative sense. The distinct property of the simile is the simultaneous existence and ambiguity of a link between two terms.

This ambiguity has been criminally left unnoticed in the secondary literature - the simile is too often considered as that term which aspires to the level of the metaphor, a special case of metaphor, or simply an empirical statment. A proper consideration of the ambiguity of simile is able to dispense with these degradations of the simile and instead bring forward the incredible linguistic power of the device, as we see it used in Hemingway’s story. This consideration relies on the question “what sort of similarity does simile draw?” This must be closely considered. For when a simile is stated, x like y , it is crucial to note that no detectable concrete similarity is stated—thus the use of mathematical variables here. In what *way* is x like y ? Which quality do they share, if any? The answers to these and other similar questions are not present in the simile. Rather, the simile makes a pre-identical, pre-actualized, pre-attributal comparison between the two terms and presents some fundamentally constitutive similarity between the two. The simile makes no claims of equality, nor difference, nor does it admit of any measure of intensity. Things are “like” in many ways— x may be incredibly similar to y , but incredibly dissimilar from z . These measurements may be valid, but cannot be said to be deduced from the word “like”—this is the ambiguity of the simile. Only after a simile is stated can one begin to list similar attributes of the two terms: the statement “ x is like y in *these* ways” relies on x and y being similar *first*.

Now, a simplistic question: why is the simile not necessarily banal? That is, why do statements of similarity not bore the eye into slumber? Isn’t it quite obvious that, given any two terms, *some* valid similarity can be drawn between them? These questions are valid. It is certainly true that similarities between even the most distantly related terms are ever-present and easily found. The error in these questions comes when one forgets that though all is one, all is also many. Everything *is* like everything else in an infinite number of ways, but just so is everything *different* from everything else in an infinite number of ways. This

tension is compacted and focused, geniusly, into the term “similar.” To say “ x is similar to y ” holds x and y in precisely this undetermined, compacted state; x and y are simultaneously similar and dissimilar. Herein lies the generativity of the simile—if the simile sought to make a statement of total equality or total difference, it *would* be a weaker sort of metaphor. But similarity is irreducible to equality or inequality. Rather, it holds identity and difference in an unresolved tension, allowing a continuous and unending process of free and untrammelled comparison.

The simile is an incredibly versatile device; one does not suppose that a simile can ever truly “fail,” as is said of metaphors. Metaphors have an agenda—they are created for a purpose. In relation to that purpose, it may be quite apt to speak of a “poor” metaphor. This cannot be said of simile. Simile has no agenda because the statement of the simile is not productive—only associative. It seems disingenuous, then, to speak of a “failed” simile. It does not seem that the distance, so to speak, between the two terms in the simile has anything to do regarding the effectiveness of the simile. Even a simple simile, in which the two compared terms are supposed to be naturally quite similar, opens a space for *unnatural* excess, so to speak. That is, though the two terms in the simple simile may seem quite similar, the openness of the simile allows for uncommon or unobvious similarities to be drawn. The simile, while not equating the two bodies it considers, does fashion a statement of similarity that extends to each body as a whole. x , in its wholeness, is like y , in *its* wholeness. The simile does not compare sections, subsets, or attributes of its terms, but rather suggests a likeness in the two terms as wholes. Thus the simple simile, whose terms are, it might be said, similar enough to evade the necessity of the “like,” makes just as radical a comparison as the “complex” simile, whose terms are so distant as to necessitate the “like” for any connection to be seen in the first place. Can we accept these ideas and still claim that the terms of a simile can be too close (the unnecessary simile) or too far (the unfounded simile)? I think not.

It is crucial, also, to be acutely aware that the simile, in preceding the terms it compares, does not exist in either term and is not collapsable into either term. It exists on the border of the two terms, as an external third. If we return to our previous claim, that everything is like everything else in an infinite number of ways implies by negation that everything is *unlike* everything else in an infinite number of ways, we might ask how it is possible to distinguish anything from anything else! What, indeed, is the state of the identity of any object if it is simulatenously infinitely similar and infinitely dissimilar from its neighbors? We must, again, join Deleuze to the simile to answer this question. Deleuze tells us to “Think difference before identity.” That is, we must not suppose that tangible identities exist positively, without reference to any deeper principle. We must note that it is necessary to have difference *first*, so as to allow distinction, language, and/or the existence of the subject to exist at all. It seems clear, then, that though the simile does make an attempt to draw likenesses between terms, it also necessitates a recognition of the difference in the two terms, lest it collapse into the metaphorical “is” and equate its terms. The simile, therefore, acts as

both a joining bridge between terms and as a separator of those terms. It dances on the border of similarity and difference, thereby containing both within itself. The “like” is both infinitely similar to itself and infinitely different from itself. Deleuze’s field of difference finds its linguistic equivalent in the “like.”

To the ever-popular pair of the simile and the metaphor, we must include a third: the conjunction. This inclusion is necessary if the connection between the metaphor and the simile is considered. The one characteristic that can definitely be said to be shared between the metaphor and the simile is the structure of their actions. Both structure make a consideration of two terms, linking them in the case of the simile and equating them in case of the metaphor. This consideration, as previously shown, takes place in a common virtual space, which allows linguistic manipulation of the multiplicities and intensities of the terms concerned. The ability to observe, so to speak, of *an* object or term’s multiplicities and intensities in the virtual space does not seem particularly contentious. But the location of *two* terms in the *same* virtual space requires further discussion, it seems. The question must be asked: what can account for this common space? It could be naively said that objects and signifiers are self-contained, isolated, and unable of legitimate interaction—any supposed interaction would be accountable to the subjective observer. This claim may hold a certain level of validity, but only if one disregards the affective quality of objects and signifiers. This is precisely why Deleuze introduces consideration of the field of difference and the virtual space: if a subject interacts with two identical objects and experiences them differently, the difference in affect cannot be located in either the object or the subject. The consideration of some intermediary space in between the subject and the object is necessary to explain this difference in affect. Objects cannot be self-contained, then, if one has a proper conception of the virtual space. For the object must bare its interior to the virtual space, that the virtual space might change its shape slightly. But then, of course, *all* objects must be open to the virtual space, and must be open to it simultaneously. There is, therefore, no obvious issue with the simultaneous existence of two objects or signifiers within the same space.

Furthermore, it is not only true that the existence of two signifiers in the same virtual space is a commonality between metaphor and simile, it is also true that the existence of the two signifiers in the same virtual space *precedes* and grounds the metaphor and the simile: the “and” comes before and gives the conditions for the “is” and the “like.” Deleuze and Guattari, in their landmark work *A Thousand Plateaus*, regard the “and” as *the* foundational word: DG AND QUOTE. The “and” is to the “like” what Heidegger is to Deleuze.

2.

Similes

- Sonnet 60: Like as the waves make towrds the pebbl'd shore, so do our minutes hasten to their end
- Henry V: I see you stand like greyhounds at the slips
- Macbeth: But like a man he died
- 1 Thessalonians 5:2: For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.