

Metonymy, Metaphor and Surrealism: Reading Lacan whilst riding a horse

Freud (1900) describes the dream-work as a process of condensation and displacement, still governed by a logic of similarity. Jakobson (1956) finds a comparable two-fold structure in language itself. He distinguishes a paradigmatic axis of selection from a syntagmatic axis of combination, a distinction that gives Lacan (1957) the basis for his claim that the unconscious is structured like a language. In "*L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient*" (1957/2006), Lacan builds his theory on Freud's concepts and develops them further through his own formulas. Condensation becomes metaphor. Displacement becomes metonymy. But Lacan strips the metaphor of the similarity criterion Freud still relied on. Meaning is now produced by substitution alone. As Lacan puts it, metaphor's spark "flashes between two signifiers, one of which has replaced the other by taking the other's place in the signifying chain" (Lacan, 1957/2006, p. 507).

This essay shows that this mechanism of substitution, one that does not depend on any relationship of similarity, is also found among the Surrealists, and uses it to explain the structure of metaphor in Lacan's work. I will first explain how Freud classifies the two ways the dream operates in the unconscious. I will then show how Roman Jakobson lays the groundwork for Lacan by putting these two mechanisms into a linguistic perspective. Finally, I will analyse Leonora Carrington's short story "The Seventh Horse" (1988) from a Lacanian perspective, in order to understand how meaning is produced through the stylistic devices favoured by the Surrealists.

I. Freud's Dream-Work: Condensation and Displacement

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud describes the dream-work as the process by which the actual, repressed thoughts underlying a dream, the latent content, are transformed into what we remember upon waking, the manifest content. Both mechanisms matter for this essay even though its central interest lies with metaphor, because Lacan derives his own two structures directly from this Freudian pair. Two mechanisms carry most of the transformation.

A) Condensation

Several latent thoughts are compressed into a single dream element, so that one image can carry multiple meanings at once, what Freud calls "overdetermination" (Freud, 1900/1953). A single figure in a dream can fuse features of several real people into one composite form. Condensation depends on a shared feature between its elements. In Jakobson's terms, this reliance on similarity aligns it with the metaphoric pole of language, since "similarity connects a metaphoric term with the term for which it is substituted" (Jakobson, 1956/1990, p. 132). It should be noted

that Jakobson himself does not classify condensation this way. The third section of this essay returns to that discrepancy. This is the case in Freud's *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy* (1909/1955). Hans develops a fear of being bitten by a horse, and Freud reads the horse as a substitute for the father. This substitution rests on concrete similarity, since the horse's black blinkers and the muzzle around its mouth correspond to the father's glasses and moustache.

B) Displacement

The psychical accent shifts from an element that is actually important in the latent dream-thoughts to one that is actually unimportant, so that the dream appears on the surface to be about something quite different from what it is latently concerned with.

Freud's own account remains descriptive rather than structural. He shows that condensation depends on shared features and displacement on mere association, but he does not derive these two mechanisms from any general theory of meaning. It is Roman Jakobson who, working from linguistics rather than psychoanalysis, supplies the structural framework within which Freud's two mechanisms can be systematically distinguished. Or, in other words, Jakobson saddled the horses so Lacan could ride.

II. Jakobson: Two Axes of Language

Roman Jakobson analyses the structure of language by examining patients suffering from aphasia in *"Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances"* (1956), where he refers directly to Freud. "A competition between both devices, metonymic and metaphoric, is manifest in any symbolic process, be it intrapersonal or social," he writes. "Thus in an inquiry into the structure of dreams, the decisive question is whether the symbols and the temporal sequences used are based on contiguity, Freud's metonymic 'displacement' and synecdochic 'condensation,' or on similarity, Freud's 'identification and symbolism'" (Jakobson, 1956/1990, p. 132). He then divides aphasic disorders into two types.

A) Similarity Disorder

Patients affected by a similarity disorder lose the capacity for selection and substitution, while their capacity for combination and contexture remains relatively intact. A sentence can only be produced once it is anchored in an actual context, a real interlocutor or a real situation, since the patient can no longer draw independently on the paradigmatic set of alternatives a word belongs

to. Jakobson notes that "the deeper the utterance is embedded in the verbal or nonverbalized context, the higher are the chances of its successful performance by this class of patients" (Jakobson, 1956/1990, p. 121). Words with a strong contextual bond, pronouns and connectives, survive longest, while nouns, which depend most heavily on paradigmatic selection, are the first to disappear, often replaced by vague general terms such as *thing*. Crucially, this type of patient loses access to metaphor. As Jakobson puts it, such patients "grasped the words in their literal meaning but could not be brought to understand the metaphoric character of the same words" (Jakobson, 1956/1990, p. 125). What remains available to them is metonymy, *fork* substituted for *knife*, *smoke* for *pipe*, since these substitutions rest not on similarity of meaning but on habitual contiguity within a shared context.

B) Contiguity Disorder

The opposite deficiency affects combination and contexture, while selection and substitution remain intact. Syntactic rules binding words into higher units are lost. Sentences degenerate into a mere "word heap" (Jakobson, 1956/1990, p. 126), and grammatical words disappear first, since they depend most heavily on context. What survives is the isolated word, and in extreme cases only one-word utterances remain. Within this reduced speech, the patient still operates through similarity. His approximate identifications are "of a metaphoric nature" (Jakobson, 1956/1990, p. 126), *spyglass* for *microscope*, *fire* for *gaslight*, since combination, the operation that would connect these words to a context, is no longer available to him.

Jakobson draws the general conclusion that "in aphasia one or the other of these two processes is restricted or totally blocked, an effect which makes the study of aphasia particularly illuminating for the linguist. In normal verbal behavior both processes are continually operative, but [...] under the influence of a cultural pattern, personality, and verbal style, preference is given to one of the two processes over another" (Jakobson, 1956/1990, p. 129).

Jakobson then applies this dualism directly to the opposition of metaphor and metonymy. He asks how the topic of a discourse can shift from one thing to another and identifies two possible paths. An operation of similarity he calls the metaphoric way. An operation of contiguity he calls the metonymic way, named after the figures of speech in which each finds its most condensed expression. Presented with the stimulus *hut*, one child responds *burnt out*, following syntactic contiguity and thus the metonymic way, while another responds *little house*, following semantic similarity and thus the metaphoric way. Jakobson extends this distinction to two types of poetic prose. The realist novel typically shifts its object metonymically, moving from a person to the room

they occupy, while lyric poetry tends to shift metaphorically, redescribing the same thing in different words.

When it comes to art forms, Jakobson applies these observations more broadly, bridging the gap from Freud's analysis of dreams to a general linguistic point of view. "In verbal art the interaction of these two elements is especially pronounced," he writes, and "in poetry there are various motives which determine the choice between these alternants" (Jakobson, 1956/1990, p. 130). Most relevant here, he adds that "a salient example from the history of painting is the manifestly metonymic orientation of Cubism, where the object is transformed into a set of synecdoches. The Surrealist painters responded with a patently metaphoric attitude" (Jakobson, 1956/1990, p. 130). Both mechanisms prove relevant for the short story by the Surrealist Leonora Carrington analysed in the final part of this essay.

It is worth noting that the connection drawn here between psychoanalysis and Surrealism is itself metonymic, in Jakobson's sense. Jakobson defines combination as a relation of contiguity, noting that "any sign is made up of constituent signs and/or occurs only in combination with other signs" (Jakobson, 1956/1990, p. 119). Freud, Lacan and the Surrealists are linked in just this way. They occur together, adjacent to one another, sharing the same terrain, the unconscious, and the same interest in dream-like material that bends or exceeds ordinary reality. It is this contiguity of concern that justifies reading the Surrealists through a psychoanalytic lens.

Carrington's short story "*The Seventh Horse*" (1988) is a good example of the interaction between metonymy and metaphor. Horses in her work more generally symbolise social conditions and her own place within bourgeois society, sometimes appearing as an alter ego, while within this particular story it is the metonymic arrangement of chosen symbols that carries the narrative forward, raising the question of how one element leads to another and how meaning is produced in the first place. The story is especially well suited to this analysis because, although it is prose, and Jakobson notes that "the principle of Similarity underlies poetry [...] while prose is forwarded by contiguity" (Jakobson, 1956/1990, p. 132), it operates with an unusually high density of both metonymies and metaphors. The story also foregrounds a use of metaphor that is specifically Lacanian. To understand why, we now turn to how metaphor and metonymy are structured in Lacan's "*L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient*" (1957/2006).

III. Lacan and Carrington

Jakobson himself does not align condensation and displacement with metaphor and metonymy in the way the previous section implied. For Jakobson, condensation and displacement are both forms of the metonymic pole, grouped together as contiguity-based mechanisms. Metaphor he links instead to identification and symbol-formation. Lacan's translation of Freud is thus not simply a transfer of Jakobson's terms onto Freud's. It re-sorts Freud's two mechanisms differently than Jakobson himself had done. For Lacan, condensation becomes metaphor and displacement becomes metonymy. Lacan credits Jakobson explicitly for the underlying formulation, paying homage to "his work, which at every turn offers the analyst a means of structuring his experience" (Lacan, 1957/2006, p. 496).

Before turning to metonymic and metaphoric devices in Carrington's text, a short summary of the story is useful.

In "*The Seventh Horse*" a strange hybrid creature, half woman and half horse, is found trapped in a bramble bush in the garden of Philip and his wife Mildred. Mildred refuses to free her, disgusted by her immodesty. Philip, contemptuous of his wife, later releases the creature. That evening, the creature named Hevalino, and her six horses corner a fat, fearful bird that has hidden in the garden for seventy-seven years and force him to report what is happening inside the house. The bird warns them that something terrible will happen if he tells them what he is seeing. Under threat, he begins to speak, and a black moth leaves his mouth. He describes an argument during *dinner*. Mildred claims to be pregnant, which Philip disbelieves, since the marriage has been sexless for five years. Philip storms up to the attic, where he sits among old family belongings while a black moth feeds on them (having his "*dinner*"). As he throws open the window, his sentence breaks off mid-word, and the bird's own narration is interrupted by a long, sickening neigh. That night, the horses gather at the stable. Philip mounts the seventh horse, Hevalino, and in riding her feels they have become "one creature." By dawn, the groom counts only six horses. Hevalino is missing. Mildred is later found trampled to death near the stable, with no sign of the pregnancy she claimed, while a small, misshapen foal is discovered in the previously empty seventh stall.

A) Metonymy

The clearest instance is the recurring word *dinner*. Forced to say what he sees happening in the house, the bird answers "They are at dinner," and a black moth flies from his mouth (Carrington, 1988, p. 68). Later, in the attic, a black moth is as described awn the summary "making his dinner" on the family's old clothes (Carrington, 1988, p. 70). Nothing links these two scenes at

the level of meaning. A forced confession and a moth eating cloth have nothing in common. The only connection is the word itself, reappearing word for word. This is exactly the structure Lacan describes through his example of "thirty sails" standing for a fleet of ships. "The connection between ship and sail is nowhere other than in the signifier," he writes, "and metonymy is based on the word-to-word nature of this connection" (Lacan, 1957/2006, p. 506). Just as nothing about a ship resembles a sail, nothing about confession resembles decay. The two scenes are held together purely by the fact that the same word passes through both. The moth accumulates a sense of doom not because it symbolises anything, but because it keeps recurring alongside the same word, *dinner* – meaning generated entirely by repetition at the level of the signifier, exactly the word-to-word connection Lacan is describing.

A second instance is the story's insistence on counting. Seven horses appear at the outset. Hevalino and her six horses circle the bird seven times (Carrington, 1988, p. 67). Philip has finished his dinner upstairs "for the seventh time in seven days." The number establishes a chain in which every element occupies a fixed position, until the final count breaks it. Asked how many horses there are, the groom answers "Six, sir" (Carrington, 1988, p. 71). Hevalino, who has just merged with Philip in the ride, drops out of the count. Nothing links Hevalino to the position "seventh" except the fact of counting itself. The chain does not resolve into a stable total but closes over an absence, leaving her position open rather than filled.

A third, smaller instance concerns Philip's sentence in the attic, which breaks off mid-word ("he flings open the window and gives a long . . ." (Carrington, 1988, p. 70)). The bird's own narration is interrupted by "a long sickening neigh" (Carrington, 1988, p. 71), and the text never specifies whose. Lacan designates metonymy "the first aspect of the actual field the signifier constitutes, so that meaning may assume a place there" (Lacan, 1957/2006, p. 506). The signifying chain simply continues, and whatever occupies the next position fills the gap, regardless of what kind of thing it turns out to be.

B) Metaphor (and the break with Freud)

Before formalising metaphor, Lacan pauses on the Surrealists, and the passage is important because it complicates rather than confirms the reading proposed so far. He credits "modern poetry and the Surrealist school" with a genuine insight, that any two signifiers can meet in a metaphor, but calls the doctrine behind their practice "false" (Lacan, 1957/2006, p. 507), because the Surrealists believed metaphor required an additional condition: the greatest possible disparity between the images involved, a shock of distance producing the "poetic spark." For

Lacan, no such condition is needed. Metaphor requires no disparity, exotic or otherwise, only substitution. Its "creative spark," he writes, "does not spring forth from the juxtaposition of two images." It "flashes between two signifiers, one of which has replaced the other by taking the other's place in the signifying chain," while the replaced signifier stays present beneath the surface, held there by its own metonymic ties to the rest of the chain (Lacan, 1957/2006, p. 507). One word for another, a real substitution without similarity.

This is precisely where Lacan breaks with Freud. Freud's condensation still requires a shared feature between the two terms substituted for one another, some point of resemblance at which they can be superimposed, the way Galton's composite photographs align around a common trait. Lacan's substitution needs no such point of contact. What determines whether a metaphor works is not any likeness between the terms, but simply whether one has successfully taken the other's place in the chain. Lacan makes this break explicit by returning, later in the same text, to little Hans, not through Freud's resemblance-based reading, where the horse stands in for the father because it resembles him, the blinkers as his glasses, the muzzle as his moustache, but structurally. Hans, he writes, develops "all the possible permutations of a limited number of signifiers in the form of a myth, around the signifying crystal of his phobia" (Lacan, 1957/2006, p. 519f.). Where Freud's horse needs a visible point of resemblance to carry its meaning, Lacan's horse is simply one term in a chain that could, in principle, have been occupied by something else entirely.

Carrington's story offers exactly this kind of substitution, successful and unsupported by resemblance. Hevalino is the clearest case. Asked to describe her, Mildred's companion can only manage, "Is it an animal or a woman?" (Carrington, 1988, p. 69), a question that registers the failure of resemblance as a category altogether. Hevalino is not like a woman and like a horse. She occupies both positions in the chain at once, without either term explaining or resembling the other. The union of Philip and the mare works the same way. "They were one creature" (Carrington, 1988, p. 71) is not a comparison but an accomplished substitution, one term taking the other's place with nothing held in common between them.

The most consequential substitution involves the foal discovered in the seventh stall (Carrington, 1988, p. 71). In my reading I don't understand it as Hevalino's offspring, and not as Hevalino herself, but as Mildred's, the literal, non-human residue of a pregnancy that was claimed but never confirmed, standing in for the human child at precisely the place that child would have occupied. On Freud's model, where substitution depends on a shared feature, this replacement should have no right to succeed. Nothing connects a foal to a human infant directly

but rather to Mildred's or Philip's desire, what is open for interpretation. It can only succeed because the story's metonymic structure had already prepared a place for it, the marriage bed Philip had declared empty for five years, and the seventh stall the groom's miscount had already left vacant. Two lacks, opened by two different chains, converge on a single position, and the foal fills it, resembling what it replaces in neither case. This is the story's clearest demonstration of what makes Lacan's metaphor Lacanian rather than Freudian, meaning produced not by likeness but by substitution at a position the chain has already marked out as empty. It is fitting that Carrington stages this operation not in a human child, but in a horse.

The family's middle-class background, the conflict of values during the dinner and not least Carrington's own life story and the symbolic use of horses in her stories and books provide us with further clues to interpreting their meaning and allow us different interpretations.