

A Hero Falls into a Forest



When the swordsman fell in Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*
in the gray rain,
in the Cinemascope and the Tokugawa dynasty,
he fell straight as a pine, he fell
as Ajax fell in Homer
in chanted dactyls and the tree was so huge
the woodsman returned for two days
to that lucky place before he was done with the sawing
and on the third day he brought his uncle.

The first verse of Robert Haas's poem "Heroic Simile" introduces a shift from normal expectations (the extension of an original situation used as a simile for a more subtle "real subject") to an unexpected emphasis on a simile itself, the comparison of a slain hero to a felled erect large pine. Instead of learning about heroes, in Kurosawa or the simile Homer, we learn about the processing of the tree's spoils with saws.

In the seminar we have often examined situations where a movement in one direction is diverted into a movement in another, usually at right angles. Here, the chain of signifiers becomes the vertical of the two heroes and the tree. They all fall into a horizontal, which is materialized as the forest floor and the felled pine.

The process of falling is carefully planned in the first verse. It is not a logical extension of one thing to another in a series of rational "causal" predications. Rather, in each predication the context is switched using an ABA BCB CDC ... method. One element is dropped each time a new element is added. The preposition "in" is used in multiple senses to get from the swordsman, to the film, to the scene in the film, to the technical aspect of the film, to the historical context of the film's story. The predications themselves "fall like a tree."

None of this is subtle. In fact the shift from the "heroic vertical" to the "forest horizontal" is jarring. The normative heroic becomes the horizontal anti-heroic. We have ... what? ... we have the same idea as the *zairja*: the creation of a list with spaces that allow a sliding of signifiers. We have a sorites that, like those of Lewis Carroll, allows the construction of a riddle.

The riddle of “Heroic Simile” is introduced by a grammatical simile, that of declension. In inflected languages, where words change according to what role they play in the sentence (nominative, accusative, dative, ablative, etc.), the heroic nominative subject “falls” until it hits the ablative (from, by, in, at ...). The hero subject in “Heroic Simile” falls into a condition where what had been strong and standing is now chopped up and moved around (from, by, in, at ...) by the woodsman and his uncle.

We are used to talking about binary signifiers, and in the heroic model we have fighting alive and slain as an obvious pair. But, the hero falls and lies on the ground, horizontally, so the first movement is reversed only by the imaginary soul. The body of the hero lies perpendicular to the living standing state. In this, he occupies the former position of his shadow. We might wax poetic on the relation of death to shadows, but Haas takes advantage of this by using the simile of the fallen tree as a material basis for the large part of the poem. Between the two states of the predication of the binary, we have a gap; the gap is materialized as a fallen tree.

Can or should we do this? Obviously it’s being done before our reader’s eyes. Why? Could this be the way that the predication of the poem itself (writer/reader) is reversed, so that instead of reading the poem, we are “read *by* the poem”? If we follow the rules of simile that are set and broken by Haas, we must accept this possibility and look into it.

In Plato’s *Timæus*, the middle between predications and reversals is pure receptivity, a *khôra* that is analogous to a matrix, a womb. It is the place where subjects go to gestate, in a period of 40 weeks that, like the 40 weeks of quarantine, are an absence that affords a presence. The absence is maintained through negatives. The woodsman and his uncle are there through a negation of the normative role of the simile. We say that one thing is *like* another without getting so literal about it. As Alice says in *Alice in Wonderland*, it’s one thing to see a cat without a smile but another to see a smile without a cat. The clever thing here is that, once a smile (the simile) is allowed to exist on its own, it *can indeed* have a cat, or any other thing. The matrix/womb can be pregnant.

The *zairja* opens up space in a signifying chain (the lists that begin the *zairja*) with ideas brought from dreams or accidents, and it *accommodates* them. This is the womb function. The new ideas “impregnate” the lists of accepted ideas (signifying chains) to produce new ideas, but one also pays attention to the role of negation (random choice of spaces between topics). If one was allowed to pick and choose the points of inserting new ideas, one would use *cathexis* in the usual conventional way. One would construct, over and over again, the same *interest* in making details obey the rules that had been originally set. One would, in Vico’s terms, be a “learned man devoid of prudence,” who attempts to see every detail as caused by some higher principle. Prudence is about recovering meanings lost, at the level of detail, in the rush to universals.

We denoted this condition as +/-, a positive placement of a frame over the unknown, an attempt to settle unknown contents by placing them within a stable setting, the model of the picture frame with its scene extending to a remote vanishing point. This *pushes* the authority of the subject over the objects held tight within the frame. It predicates those objects. To allow the objects to *push back* (reversed predication) means that the objects are now looking at us, instead of we looking at them. The frame logic requires us to *resist* this reversal, to continue *pushing in the normative direction* and object to any push-back. We like to think of a cat without a smile but not a smile without a cat. We like to think of heroes but not of woodsmen.

When “Heroic Simile” pushes *back*, it is not a direct reverse pressure as much as a demonic vertical intrusion into a normative horizontal causal motion. But, Haas has rotated the horizontal to be the vertical (the hero as strong and tall as a large pine), and thus the demonic is now the pathetic woodsman in the middle of the damp forest. This is the proper relation of the middle, the *khôra*, not as a force “fighting back against” intention/framing but as a passive matrix where things are allowed to develop, even without the proper care and attention of the poet/maker (he fails to provide useful tools or note where the road goes — all “ablative” supplies of logging). Ablative is *ab lativus*, to the final form of *fero/ferre/tuli/latus*, “to bear, carry, suffer, endure.” The ablative itself seems to tell the story of the woodsman and his uncle, it becomes a metaphor,

which itself means to “carry across.” We have made a metaphor/image out of the middle, the *khôra*; but how did *fero/ferre* get such an unusual adjective form, *latus*? Is *latus* in any way related to the verb *lateo/latere* (to hide, conceal)? Is the womb-like forest concealing something by being the materialized place where the tree has “declined” from its signifying vertical to its horizontal shadow?

The *zairja* tradition says, no, we are *in-formed* by the orthogonal intrusion of chance into the chain of signifiers in the same way that experience itself is *in-formed* by accidents. If they *in-form* us a little because we are a-mused; when they *in-form* us a lot they are miracles. Any poem is a potential miracle, in its declination of conventional signification into a materialization of its middle ground, its disconnection from the intention-driven frame that pushes the unknown into the background ruled by a vanishing point.

Haas seems to be on the side of the *zairja*, and knowledgeable about the sorites, which he uses with almost as much puzzle perversity as Lewis Carroll. We get a smile without a cat, but like Carroll’s soriteses we also have the sense that the puzzle has an answer that we get simply by piling up positive and negative pairs (predicated/predicating) of the same elements and looking at the left-over couple (we have one literalized in the last lines of the poem). The remainders of “Heroic Simile” are the left-overs, the things the poet has failed to provide or pretended to “not know about.” They are recognized as lacks because the simile, the felling of the large tree, has been allowed to take over, to exceed its normal role as a pictorial aid to the main meaning of the poem.

We have turned the frame 90° and walked inside, into the “impossible” space of the simile that was supposed to afford a view of things in the distance. This distance has been collapsed, collapsed poorly. Our steps inside are missing the necessary logistic supports. We don’t have a mule or wagon, the road is not built because it is not yet “translated.”

The woodsman and the old man his uncle
are standing in midforest
on a floor of pine silt and spring mud.
They have stopped working
because they are tired and because
I have imagined no pack animal
or primitive wagon. They are too canny
to call in neighbors and come home
with a few logs after three days’ work.
They are waiting for me to do something
or for the overseer of the Great Lord
to come and arrest them.

How patient they are!
The old man smokes a pipe and spits.
The young man is thinking he would be rich
if he were already rich and had a mule.
Ten days of hauling
and on the seventh day they’ll probably
be caught, go home empty-handed
or worse. I don’t know
whether they’re Japanese or Mycenaean
and there’s nothing I can do.
The path from here to that village
is not translated. A hero, dying,
gives off stillness to the air.
A man and a woman walk from the movies
to the house in the silence of separate fidelities.
There are limits to imagination.



Indeed! The limits come to light (but should not have come to light — one of the definitions of the uncanny!) because the pushback of the simile past the frame *towards* us is weaker than our push into the space of representation. The couple walk home in a silence of separate fidelities. They make promises in *two different ways*, the ways never match up. “There is no sexual relationship,” as Lacan says, and this mismatch of promising modes is what it means. Men promise in relation to exceptions, women promise a not-all.

Even the background has its lacunæ. Ajax committed suicide and did not fall exactly like the samurai, or rather he fell “with an added complication” that makes us think that the move from the normative horizontal of heroic signification to a slip-sliding vertical opens us to a logging operation. The most famous swordfight scene in *The Seven Samurai* takes place in broad daylight, not in gray rain, which comes at the end and is drenched in the defeat of the samurai protectors. There are no easy clues; Haas is intentionally neglectful in constructing his negatives. They don’t “have what they need” to last out the 40 days of gestation! There is no happy couple going back home, no reader/writer holding hands. There is turbulence and antagonism.

But, there is a *zairja*! And, with the *zairja* comes the BloomSet that includes a demon, who provokes askesis (the stable, durable, defendable frame), and the four-part staircase of clinamen (the toppling of the tall tree-hero). The two conditions of the poem (the metaphoric hero and the embodied simile in the forest) are tesserated. Their jagged edge of separation is permanently negative, thanks to the poet’s neglect. The couple have separate fidelities. There are things the reader doesn’t know that she knows because the poet “doesn’t know what or even that he knows” — *kenosis*. But, this poem as all other poems is a voice that is produced by a “stochastic” acousmatic resonance (cf. the song that reminds us of Michael Fury, the other angel in Joyce’s “The Dead”) that seems to come acousmatically, from “off-stage.” With this staircase we can map the poem without forcing it out of its temporality. In fact, like the nine eyes of the Google street-view camera, it is *precisely the temporality* of its “reading the landscape” that allows it to map the un-mappable.

What has interested me most in our discussions has been your resistance. You seem not to want to move out of the metaphoric straight line that requires meanings to be carried across (*meta-pharō*) the processes of predication/ signifying; instead most of you seem to prefer departing the poem’s temporality in favor of an *ut pictura poiesis* (a poem should paint a picture) point of view. Most resist the “signifierness” of the poem in order to complicate things for yourself. Most prefer the elaborate work-arounds, which extend meaning *past* the poem in front of you, to the things that are clearly and solidly *in* the poem. This resistance makes teaching impossible/difficult; but learning is still possible. When anyone *chooses to cease to resist*, s/he lets the world come forward, and it speaks. Stuff jumps out of the frame to present itself as pure joy. As the reverse-predication cowboy in *The Great Labowski* says, “Sometimes you eat the bear, sometimes the bear eats you.” Reverse predication isn’t so bad, however. It is the stuff of miracles, epiphanies. It is the world telling you how you can *be* by simply *becoming*. Maternalize yourself. Retreat. Let the demon in. Allow forty weeks.



Pere Borrell del Caso
Escapando de la crítica (1874)

I will not try to “point you in the correct direction.” You know all about the four kinds of knowers, the astute ignoramus, all that. You have not forgotten, I hope, that the fool is not an entirely useless way of knowing. You can educate yourself about the four types of discourse, the four conditions of sexuation/engendering, the four “seasons” of the mind, and the four humors that are also conditions of knowing. You know that these quadrations are related to the binary, and that Lewis Carroll developed a whole logical system around it that, unlike Boolean logic, could accommodate the Lacanian feminine (which we have not covered), the “not-all.” You will know next time to mention at least one of these as a place-holder until some more workable idea arrives to your brain.

You already probably knew that “in chanted lines” is also “enchanted lines,” just as you possibly had already figured out that Ajax did not in fact fall like a tree but fell on his own sword, or that at least one swordsman died in the sunshine. You may have known all that, or can know it any time you want. Maybe even you will discover that the tree doesn’t fall like a tree! Maybe like the couple walking home from the theater, it has its own internal antagonism, it’s own way of making promises (even to itself) that it can’t keep. —Hey, that’s actually a good summation of Lacanian subjectivity!

You have a lot of time. You can understand, eventually, the meaning of “there are limits to the imagination,” and know that this has to do with framing (= predication) and the gap in between the reversals. Blah blah blah. For you, these links may now be no more important than selecting the right wine for dinner. As for me, I don’t have the leisure time for too many wrong answers.

Enjoy yourselves! Or, rather, let yourselves *be enjoyed by* the wonders that lie in front of you as long as you don’t push them back, like some impudent hernia, into the viscera of the represented world. If you don’t want to believe in the reversed predication of the poem–reading–you idea, then please be my guest and continue to live inside the chains of signifiers that you can slice and dice as the art historians do, with all the great professional paybacks — tenure, publications, and keynote address invitations. But, the invitation to do otherwise will always be open, and I hope you will accept that instead.

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