

## Marge Piercy's Use of Metaphor

Marge Piercy's first two volumes of poetry (Breaking Camp in 1968 and Hard Loving in 1969) have established her as a poet not of promise but of achievement. She can both stun her reader with the plain power of metaphor and she can address contemporary questions of existence. An examination of Piercy's treatment of metaphor is a useful device for revealing some of her strengths.

Piercy's frequent exploitation of the power of the verb gives many of her metaphors a muscular quality:

His laugh breaks in his throat to pieces of sun.<sup>1</sup>

The gnarled ladder of my spine explodes in petals.<sup>2</sup>

Blindness loud as hunger hollows me.<sup>3</sup>

Sun melts on my tongue.<sup>4</sup>

Pyramids of flesh sweat pyramids of stone.<sup>5</sup>

"Breaks," the verb in the first example, is the active principle and the center of the entire metaphor. "Explodes" in the second

example unifies "gnarled ladder" and "petals," while it also expresses a surprising and violent activity that puts ladder and petals into a unique and vividly imaginative relationship. It is the heart of an unusually effective metaphor. In the third example, the initial figure, "blindness loud as hunger," is in itself sufficiently forceful; Piercy intensifies the line yet further by compounding the metaphor with the verb "hollows" (which also activates the figure that it amplifies). Similarly, the verbs "melts" and "sweats" in the last two examples are both central to and activating principles of the metaphors that they unify. The greatest potential power in the English language lies in the verb, and Piercy is not satisfied merely to put the action there (where it belongs). As each of the above lines demonstrate, she effectively locates metaphor in her verbs, and she thereby gives her language a distinct robustness.

Piercy's ability to conceive and to present arresting metaphors is consistent. Sometimes her metaphors have complex concision and they come heavy, one on top of the other. "The simplification" begins

"A rolling tank of man, ramparts of flesh,                    1  
 a capitalist, a federal reserve of food,  
 a consumptive disease fed with crane and bucket,

he trundled in a gnatswarm of obscene joke  
 with his wife slim and grave as a nursing doe 5  
 ...."

The military metaphors "rolling tank of man" and "ramparts of flesh" initially establish a figure of force, bulk, and vaguely unattractive aggressive strength. "A capitalist" is perhaps more strongly negative in Piercy's movement vocabulary, and "a federal reserve of food," yet more so. The latter, on top of "ramparts of flesh," wittily suggests gluttony (it also has negative political overtones), and the following line moves even further in connoting complexities of diseased bulk. "Crane and bucket" transforms the subject into a nonhuman object. Line 4 achieves much of its power because of the progression we have noted in lines 1-3. Line 4 is (in the above sequence) the culminating negative layer of description that contrasts strongly with the understated description of the wife in line 5. She is "slim and grave as a nursing does," and the quiet, the meekness, the gentleness of the doe set in relief the barreling military-like activity of line 1 and of each of the other negative qualities in lines 2-4.

Piercy handles metaphor differently in "Erasure." The poem illustrates the way in which she tends to unify entire poems by variations and by repetitions of metaphor<sup>6</sup>:

## "Erasure

Falling out of love

is a rusty chain going quickly through a winch.

It ~~hurst~~<sup>hurts</sup> more than you will remember.

It costs a pint of blood turned grey

and burning out a few high paths

5

among the glittering synapses of the brain,

a few stars fading out at once in the galaxy,

a configuration gone

imagination called a lion or a dragon or a sunburst

that would photograph more like a blurry mouse. 10

When falling out of love is correcting vision

light grates on the eyes

light files the optic nerve hot and raw.

To find you have loved a coward and a fool

is to give up the lion, the dragon, the sunburst 15

and take away your hands covered with small festering bites

and let the mouse go in a grey blur

into the baseboard."<sup>7</sup>

Piercy's metaphors weave in and out of the poem and establish its unity. "Rusty chain" of line 2 reverberates in the "grates" of line 12. "Grey," "mouse," and "blur" occur in lines 4, 10, and 17 as figures of repetition, and additionally the "grey"

of line 4 with its association of blood unites with the brain image of lines 5 and 6. A compound figure of repetition involving lion, dragon, and sunburst appears in lines 9 and 15. Through all these run the variants of light images and metaphors: "glittering" (line 6), "stars" (line 7), "sunburst" (line 9), "photograph" (line 10), "vision" (line 11), "light" (line 12), "light" and "optic nerve" (line 13), "sunburst" (line 15), and "blur" (line 17). By the repetitions and variations of figures, Piercy unifies the poem in a metaphorically complex way.

The inventive imagination frequently reveals itself by the variety it can endow to a frequently used image or idea. Piercy's interest in words precipitates a shower of figures that demonstrate the flexibility of her imagination:

"Words are shutters on the eyes  
and lead gloves on the hands."<sup>8</sup>

"Stiff as frozen rope words poke out  
lopsided, in a fierce clothespin treble."<sup>9</sup>

"Words that foam and dry and harden  
tear my lips."<sup>10</sup>

"...I scurry with glass words scolding in my chest."<sup>11</sup>

"The eyes of others are watches ticking no."<sup>12</sup>

The last example involves the specific word "no," and the line is particularly felicitous for the pun involved in "watches." There is the sense of watching in that people are looking at the persona (and her lover) in an unfavorable way, and there is the weight of the continuous 'watching' that 'watch' as clock implies. Each tick ("no") is a repetition of social disapproval.

In "The organizer's bogeyman,"<sup>13</sup> "...words stain the room like dirty water," and in "Juan's twilight dance,"<sup>14</sup> a poem about the infamous Don Juan,

"Words were water or weapons.

...his need gleamed like a knife and the words spurted.

He never understood what the women minded.

He never could see how he cheated them

with words, the mercury words no one could grasp

as they gleamed and slipped and darted."

The fusion of "words" with sexuality is particularly apt and effective in the Juan poem. Directed solely toward sexual end, words (as they gleam and slip and dart) are no less than semen. Our list of "word" figures might continue, but as it is, it suffices to demonstrate Piercy's ability to see a single concept or image with imaginative prolixity.

Although Piercy is capable of metaphors of the more tra-

ditional sort ("Trees grey ankles wade in the flooding moon"<sup>15</sup>), she more usually surprises us with distinctive originality. That is, whereas any good poet might have described an orchard as a "confetti of bruised petals,"<sup>16</sup> passages like

"What enemy do I race white breathed  
who blast my eyes with a blizzard of wish and gravel"<sup>17</sup>

are singularly Piercy-like. They have the element of the unexpected ("blizzard of wish and gravel") that startles, alerts, and leads us to perceive in a way we could not but for Piercy. The total metaphoric conception of "August, submerging,"<sup>18</sup> a poem that ends, "Search no calendars./ I make the climate in which I freeze and burn," again gives us the sense of a distinct poetic voice. In "Landed fish,"<sup>19</sup> Danny has "money in the pockets of his desperate George Raft pants," and

"His eyes flicker like leaves,  
his laugh breaks in his throat to pieces of sun."

The latter line concisely captures an engaging quality in Danny. In "Visitors with too much baggage," the wife "looks about to cry teeth."<sup>20</sup> The use of teeth is both surprising and striking.

Yet the metaphor does not make the poem. Piercy's real strength resides not simply in her ability to construct striking figures, but more particularly in the way in which they fuse

(or are fused) into the poem. Meaning and metaphor are perfectly integrated. We can see such fusion, for example, in the numerous lines of epigrammatic tightness that are scattered throughout the two volumes under consideration:

"Tenderness is a mosquito on your arm."<sup>21</sup>

"Love is arthritic. Mistrust swells like a prune."<sup>22</sup>

"Man eats man with sauces of newsprint."<sup>23</sup>

The first example comes from a poem dealing with an unsatisfactory lover. The line tightly and wryly locates one of the lover's deficiencies and leaves the poet free to explore others. The second example comes from a poem about life in communes, and the single line presents two statements, both strongly metaphorical, both powerfully meaningful. They not only evoke the negative and inadequate feelings of the residents of the commune, but they provocatively suggest reasons for their implicit failures. The third example is ~~so~~ richly suggestive out of context, ~~that~~ and we merely point out that the figure is in no way self-serving. Once again, metaphor is the vehicle of meaning.

The limits of our essay preclude consideration of Piercy's ideas, but we should not therefore fail to indicate that she deals with problems that are central in our age. One of the dangers of art, according to Iris Murdoch,<sup>24</sup> is that art can



function to console us (in situations that call more properly for arousal or indignation or rage). It is one of the special marks of Marge Piercy's genius that in spite of the strength and beauty of her forms, we are at least as much aroused as we are consoled, we participate intensely in the experiences she describes, we become more human and more humane.

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## FOOTNOTES

- 1 "Landed fish," Breaking Camp (BC), p. 37.
- 2 "Exactly how I pursue you," BC, p. 41.
- 3 "The organizer's bogeyman," Hard Loving (HL), p. 66.
- 4 "Exactly how I pursue you," BC, p. 41.
- 5 "Homo faber: the shell game," HL, p. 68.
- 6 This device, of course, has been consistently used by poets in the past. It is not unique to Piercy.
- 7 HL, p. 26.
- 8 "Walking into love," HL, p. 13.
- 9 "For Jeriann's hands," HL, p. 27.
- 10 "Your eyes are hard, and other surprises," HL, p. 41.
- 11 "Running toward R.," BC, p. 47.
- 12 "Walking into love," HL, p. 12.
- 13 HL, p. 65.
- 14 HL, pp. 21-22.
- 15 "Night of the bear and polar light," BC, p. 40.
- 16 "Postcard from the garden," BC, p. 53.

<sup>17</sup>"Running toward R., BC, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup>BC, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup>BC, pp. 36-37.

<sup>20</sup>BC, p. 46.

<sup>21</sup>"The cyclist," HL, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup>"Community," HL, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup>"The Peaceable Kingdom," BC, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup>"Against Dryness," Encounter (Jan., 1961), p. 19.