Literally: How to Speak like an Absolute Knave

STEPHEN HEQUEMBOURG

LITERALLY. PERHAPS NO OTHER SINGLE WORD HAS CAUSED SO much trouble recently. It has become, according to Jesse Sheidlower, a former editor of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, "the word we love to hate." And it is not only professors of English who are annoyed. Revulsion at the word's misuse can be seen in countless blogs and sitcom jokes, and software engineers recently created a browser plug-in to detect and fix such erroneous uses as "I was literally swept off my feet" and "My head is literally going to explode" (Flood). The many people who are irked by such usages tend to blame the speech habits of the young and thoughtless. But the problem is not new. In 1926, H. W. Fowler complained of a newspaper headline reading, "The 300,000 Unionists . . . will be literally thrown to the wolves" ("Literally"). Nor is it always a sign of thoughtlessness. Sheidlower cites instances of the "misuse" of *literally* in Jane Austen, James Joyce, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, noting that as early as the seventeenth century *literally* began to be used as an intensifier of figurative statements. Given the term's rich pedigree, we might take a moment to appreciate the remarkable linguistic feat performed by the first person to add *literally* before a common figurative expression. The sentence "My head is going to explode" is, in most situations, a metaphor. "My head is *literally* going to explode," while not the literal statement it claims to be, is no longer simply a metaphor. Raymond Gibbs describes this kind of utterance as an instance of hyperbole, where *literally* means "in the strongest admissible way" (*Poetics* 25). Strictly speaking, however, it is an act of irony, since the meanings of *literally* and *figuratively* are antithetical and the speaker uses one in place of the other. This speech act manages to implicate many different tropes while insisting that it conveys nothing but the

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barest sense of the words. And your average teenager carries it off without a hitch.

We should, however, distinguish between what the hearer understands and what the speaker intends by using *literally* in this way. If the speaker does not mean to be hyperbolic or ironic, the hearer will recognize not a clever trope but a simple error. But what motivates this error? Consider the case of a speaker who does understand the difference between literal and figurative usage. Relating an anecdote from the relative calm of the present, the speaker might say something like "When he told me that, I thought my head would explode." But in the heat of the moment that same speaker, desiring to convey the physiological distress of a tightening jaw and increased heart rate, might say, "My head is literally going to explode!" The speaker has not temporarily forgotten the distinction between the literal and the figurative but is in fact revealing something we all probably experience at some level—the sense that a dead metaphor cannot do justice to intense bodily experience. *Literally* becomes a way of signaling an unusual degree of investment in a metaphor that has lost its ability to surprise. With the addition of *literally*, as Arran Stibbe notes, "the source domain is made more salient and the expression more metaphorically active" (qtd. in Müller 190).

This kind of literalization can alert us to aspects of embodied experience that often go unnoticed in the utterance of dead metaphors. Beginning in the 1980s, with the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, interest in dead metaphors suddenly exceeded interest in novel or poetic ones (*Metaphors* and *Philosophy*). Linguistically dead metaphors, as Lakoff and Mark Turner argue, are in fact the "most alive and most deeply entrenched" conceptual metaphors (129). Conceptual metaphors are assemblages of what Joseph Grady calls "primary metaphors"—the basic cross-domain associations, such as "More Is Up," that arise naturally from our sensorimotor experience (*Foundations*). So, a dead metaphor such as "My head is going to explode," while not especially poetic, is part of a system of conceptual metaphor composed of primary metaphors like "Anger Is Heat." While conceptual-metaphor theory has been extremely productive in the cognitive sciences, the linguist Cornelia Müller rightly objects to the way that it "treats the relation between the collective level of conceptual metaphors (embodied in a language system) and the private or individual ways of understanding the world (thinking, speaking, acting) simply as unproblematic" (13). She describes metaphors not as "dead and alive" but as "sleeping and waking," to emphasize that metaphoricity is gradable and that even the most seemingly dead metaphors can be awakened through the unexpected usages of individual speakers. Her arguments should remind cognitive linguists of what I. A. Richards long ago observed: "However stone dead such metaphors seem, we can easily wake them up" (101).

Like Müller, I will occasionally draw on theories of metaphor and the experiments of psychologists and cognitive scientists, but my primary examples of sleeping metaphors come from a family of Shakespearean characters I call "the perverse literalists." Their high priests are, in the tragic world, the gravedigger from *Hamlet* and, in the comic, Feste from *Twelfth Night*. They operate in the worlds of their plays by taking their interlocutors at their words, insisting on the literal senses of their dead metaphors. In addition to challenging the assumptions of conceptual-metaphor theory, this perverse literalism is a powerful trope in its own right, one that has played a significant role in the literature of embodiment. Phenomenologists, cognitive scientists, and those working in the new materialisms have all found the awakening of sleeping metaphors helpful in combatting the kinds of dualism that hinder our understanding of the conditions of embodiment. Like early modern clowns and modern teenagers,

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they ask us to think more deeply about what it means to understand everyday figures of speech in a more than metaphoric sense. What does it feel like to mean a metaphor literally, and what are the uses of this strange trope that insists it is not one?

The first obstacle in attempting to answer these questions is the surprisingly polysemous nature of "the literal."[1] The courtroom scene of *The Merchant of Venice* offers a miniature drama of Shakespeare's competing literalisms. Shylock is often cited as one of Shakespeare's most famous literalists, though his literalism—insisting on the letter of the bond over more charitable forms of interpretation—is unsuccessful because it can always be undermined by an even more precise adherence to the letter, as we see in Portia's triumph. Shylock believes in a perfect correspondence between the words of the bond and their real-world referent, the pound of flesh that he plans to extract from Antonio's heart. As Harold Bloom notes, Portia "out-literalizes" Shylock simply by proving that no such perfect fit exists (44). Can he take exactly a pound, no more and no less? What about the blood that would inevitably be lost as part of the operation? Her literalism too encodes its own failure, since no literal term will ever designate precisely and without dearth or excess. But right between Shylock's literalism and Portia's we find the more interesting though less appreciated literalism of Antonio. As Shylock prepares his knife, Antonio tells Bassanio:

> Repent but you that you shall lose your friend,
> And he repents not that he pays your debt;
> For if the Jew do cut but deep enough,
> I'll pay it instantly, *with all my heart*.
> (4.1.273–76; my emphasis)

Could Antonio, facing his own gruesome death, really intend this as a joke? I have never seen it played this way, on the stage or on film. The actor playing Antonio is typically wrought into such a passion that it would be difficult for him to signify any kind of knowingness. A coy smile or knowing intonation might produce more groans than laughs—as Titus does when he asks for help maiming himself: "Lend me thy hand, and I will give thee mine" (Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* 3.1.186). The average theatergoer may not even register Antonio's eerie literalism. "With all my heart" is a common courtly turn of phrase and has been used as such three times already in the play (3.2.195, 3.4.35, 4.1.146). A more interesting possibility is that Antonio delivers the line with no special thought or intention, as nothing more than a dead metaphor—only to realize just after, with a mixture of amusement and terror, the literal truth he had unknowingly spoken.

When a dead metaphor is literalized, the slightest distinction in tone can be the difference between the silly and the sublime. The more powerful instances involve a moment of surprise at the fact that dead metaphors can have a grip on the material world that the speaker did not expect or intend. Antonio may be able to overhear the literal truth behind his metaphor, but more often it takes another character to bring the speaker to this realization. Recent cognitive approaches to Shakespeare have shown the incredible range of their objects of study—from conceptual-metaphor and conceptual-blending theory to characters as sites of cognition, from the bodies of actors to the brains of readers and finally to Shakespeare's own brain, and even to something like a linguistic life force working through it.[2] I focus on Shakespearean characters who reveal to others the literal truth of common figurative expressions. At their best they create in their interlocutors, and by extension in the reader, the surprise that Antonio experiences as he inadvertently wakes a dormant metaphor. Those who experience this kind of surprise can better understand the bodily nature of abstractions such as love and luck, causality and cognition.

Gail Kern Paster has explained that many of Shakespeare's physiological meta-

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phors were in fact literal statements in the Galenic philosophy of the humoral body, invoking Charles Taylor's claim that according to such a worldview "substance embodies . . . significance" (qtd. in Paster 36). But modern readers, more dualistic in their understanding of mind-body relations, are likely to find "abstraction and bodily metaphor where the early moderns found materiality and literal reference" (26). So when Desdemona worries that something has "puddled" Othello's clear spirits, the modern reader will take it as a figure of speech rather than a description of the impeded flow of humors that marks the onset of psychosomatic disease (61–63). While we may have no difficulty grasping what Desdemona means to say about Othello, her material sense "remains opaque and historically distant" (245). Studying Galenic materialism, Paster suggests, can teach us to see literal, clinical descriptions rather than metaphor. This is why her project takes the form of "an exercise in historical phenomenology" (11). She offers a valuable corrective, and much of what I will describe in the work of the perverse literalists involves a technique similar to Paster's, though mine differs from hers in an important way. It is not simply modern readers who miss the rich physicality of Shakespeare's language. Many of his own characters seem to miss it too. They make the same mistakes within the plays that we, according to Paster, make in reading them. So while Paster often assumes a division between the literal meanings of the early moderns and the modern readers' misprision of them as metaphors, I will follow Müller in stressing the gradability of dead metaphors and their potential to be suddenly transformed into facts of embodied experience. In the work of the perverse literalists, that opaque and distant literalism becomes clear and immediate, even to those who know nothing of Galen.

Perverse literalism is most revealing when the literalist is surrounded by characters who desperately want to escape from their bodies, as Biron is in *Love's Labour's Lost*. As the play begins, the King of Navarre has gathered around him a group of scholars who devote themselves to three years of monastic study so that, in the words of Longueville, "[t]he mind shall banquet, though the body pine" (1.1.25). Biron, taking the body's side, tries in vain to convince them that what they propose are "barren tasks":

> As painfully to pore upon a book
> To seek the light of truth while truth the while
> Doth falsely blind the eyesight of his look.
> Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile. (74–77)

Biron's string of *light*s employs its key term four times with four distinct meanings. I agree with A. D. Nutall's explication—the mind seeking enlightenment doth the eye of sight beguile—though I would add that the final *light*, while implying sight, is the only one that means "light" literally (93). Perhaps no other single line in Shakespeare can rival this one in its emphasis on the gradability of metaphor. In ten syllables Shakespeare moves from the immaterial mind to the scholar's blind eye, as *light* moves step by step toward its literal sense. The light of the mind, seeking the light of knowledge, deprives the eye, the body's light, of light. Biron's trajectory from the abstract to the literal is a fit gesture for one of Shakespeare's great physicalists, who uses his literalism to point to the dire consequences of attempting to live "immurèd in the brain" (4.3.302).

The play's most impressive feat of staging comes in act 4, when the lovelorn scholars catch each other in the act of confession. As each new lover enters, the previous one hides, so that by the end Biron is watching the king watching Longueville watching Dumaine, who complains, "I would forget her, but a fever she / Reigns in my blood and will remembered be" (4.3.91–92). Dumaine employs the classic trope from Shakespeare's sonnet 147: "My love

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is as a fever." But Biron refuses to understand it as a mere figure: "A fever in your blood—why then, incision / Would let her out in saucers—sweet misprision!" (93–94). His perverse literalism is meant to make us laugh, but in the context of a play about a group of body-negating scholars it also makes an important point. Even the most spiritualized of loves involves heat and the quickened movements of heart and breath—physiological symptoms that accompany real illness. It reminds us of the grounds for the original figure, the living source of the dead metaphor. Biron's case is similar to that of Othello's "puddled" spirits, though here the work of materializing the metaphor comes from inside the play. Shakespeare's own speakers disagree on how dead their metaphors really are, and the plays often dramatize such clashes of meaning. An understanding of the humoral body can indeed awaken readers to the physical senses of what seem like mere figures of speech, but at times it is enough simply to watch as Shakespeare's literalists do the work for us.

Biron's aside—"Sweet misprision!"—also reveals how much fun perverse literalism can be. For the victim, however, misprision is not always so sweet. Being held to the literal sense of one's words can be a deeply uncomfortable experience. Lancelot, in *The Merchant of Venice*, dabbles in the literal arts. Discussing Jessica's chances of salvation, he sees only one hope, "and that is but a kind of bastard hope." What is this hope, she asks? "Marry, you may partly hope that your father got you not, that you are not the Jew's daughter" (3.5.6–9). Jessica appreciates the skill involved in the act of unfiguring: "That were a kind of bastard hope indeed"; but when Lorenzo enters and becomes the victim of Lancelot's misprision, he shows much less appreciation: "I pray thee understand a plain man in his plain meaning" (48–49). In the case of a dead metaphor, the plain meaning is not the most literal or physical sense but what Paul Ricoeur calls the "lexicalized" sense (290–91). "Bastard hope" is not meant to call up images of children conceived out of wedlock. Despite his frustration with Lancelot, Lorenzo gives the "bastard" imagery one final, literalizing turn of the screw—accusing the clown of having impregnated a servant to whom he is not married. As in Biron's string of *light*s, the three *bastard* images reveal a progression from the abstract to the concrete. "Bastard hope" is purely figurative, while the proposition that Jessica is not her father's daughter is a literal though counterfactual usage. Only in the final stage of its trajectory does the term find its literal and factual instantiation. Through the combined work of Lancelot, Jessica, and Lorenzo, we see the performative thrust of perverse literalism, as figurative expressions seem to seek their own materialization in the world of the play. Characters on the Shakespearean stage should choose their metaphors carefully, for there is no telling when they may come to life—in this case, literally.

While Lancelot laughingly accepts the literal outcome of his metaphor, other characters put up a fight in defense of their figures. In the final act of *All's Well That Ends Well*, when the disgraced and outcast Paroles asks Lavatch to deliver a letter for him, he observes, "I am now, sir, muddied in Fortune's mood, and smell somewhat strong of her strong displeasure" (5.2.3–5). Lavatch, however, has little time for metaphor and is more concerned with the literal smell of his interlocutor: "Truly, Fortune's displeasure is but sluttish if it smell so strongly as thou speakest of. . . . Prithee allow the wind" (6–8). When Paroles clings to his original meaning—"Nay, you need not stop your nose, sir, I spake but by a metaphor"—Lavatch holds on to his literalism, and his nose: "Indeed, sir, if your metaphor stink I will stop my nose, or against any man's metaphor. Prithee get thee further" (9–12). In describing how his luck stinks, Paroles, like Antonio, speaks more truly than he intended.

In all these examples, the literal sense is shown to have a grip on the material world

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that the speakers do not intend to express. Such dead metaphors as "with all my heart," the "fever" of love, "bastard hope," and "stink[ing]" luck end up expressing or even bringing into existence the physical reality corresponding to the terms that were meant only as vehicles of a more abstract meaning. The realization that dead metaphors are grounded in the conditions of embodiment was one of the major inspirations of second-generation cognitive science. Lakoff and Johnson list dozens of examples. The primary metaphor "More Is Up," for instance, comes from the embodied experience of seeing the quantity of a thing physically rise as it grows, just as "Intimacy Is Closeness" comes from the infantile experience of associating warmth and care with the proximity of the maternal body (*Philosophy* 50–51). As we develop we learn to extend these terms beyond the original experience, so that it becomes possible to claim that the stock market is "up" or that I am "close" to someone who lives in Moscow. But while they claim that these conceptual metaphors are grounded in the experiences of bodies interacting with their lived environments, Lakoff and Johnson often caution us that these are only metaphors and that they "can get us into silliness if we take them literally" (168). But if they arise out of embodied experience, how does that literal and physical experience disappear so completely with the rise of conceptual metaphor?

Let us return to Paroles and his stinking luck. The joke here is based on the primary metaphor "Bad Is Stinky," which derives from the "correlation between evaluative and olfactory experience" that occurs when someone is "repelled by foul-smelling objects" (50). When we learn to say, "This movie stinks," we sever the connection between the concept and its sensorimotor grounds, allowing it to range over a wider experiential field. Raphael Lyne follows Lakoff and Johnson in speculating that the "implicit aspiration of a cognitive metaphor might be to become part of everyday speech, rather than to remain arresting and outstanding" (11). But Shakespeare often goes out of his way to foreground the original experiential correlation and to make the metaphor once again "arresting"—something that makes us stop and interrogate its lost material ground. Grady's work on primary metaphors offers a helpful extension of Lakoff and Johnson's theory on this point. Grady distinguishes between metaphors based on resemblance, such as "Achilles Is a Lion," and those based on correlation, such as "Anger Is Heat" ("Typology"). The former join two domains according to a common feature rather than any experiential link, while the latter "[involve] a tight correlation between two dimensions of experience—typically with one more related to sensory input than the other" (84). Most primary metaphors, he argues, are correlational and are closer to metonymies than to metaphors.[3] It is not surprising, then, that the primary scenes they draw on recur in ways that recall the metaphors' physical ground. Movies and ideas may be said to stink if they are not successful, but a bad meal can stink in the literal and metaphoric senses. Ted Cohen calls these "twice-true metaphors," while Gibbs prefers to call them "isomorphic" idioms: "Thus, skating on thin ice has both a literal and a figurative meaning in a situation where someone is skating on thin ice" (*Poetics* 96). In the case of Paroles, the correlative link verges on a causal one, because his bad fortune is directly responsible for his all-too-literal stench.

This perverse literalism is a great source of Shakespearean comedy. But what exactly makes it so funny? Is it the same kind of humor found, for example, in Alexander Pope's zeugmas? When we learn in *The Rape of the Lock* that Belinda may "stain her Honour, or her new Brocade," it is the juxtaposition of the serious and the trivial, the quick move from the metaphoric to the literal staining, that creates such delectable bathos (2.107). But while Shakespeare's perverse literalists make

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us laugh, it is not because they juxtapose serious abstractions with material trifles. At their best, they reveal the continuities between the two—that love is like a fever because of some common physical symptoms, or that when your luck stinks it is not unlikely, in early modern England, that you will stink along with it. Though she does not mention Pope, Paster reveals a subtle difference between him and Shakespeare when she discusses Hamlet's description of Pyrrhus as "roasted in wrath and fire" (28). A modern reader might be amused at the quick deflation of the metaphoric to the literal sense of "roasted." But this would be to miss the more literal sense of "roasting in wrath" that the Elizabethan theatergoer would hear—the "dispositional mini-environment" of the body's humors that burns in a sense not altogether different from a real fire (44). While the Popean zeugma is a perfectly controlled act of deflation, Shakespeare's perverse literalism stages a struggle between the two senses, in which the literal somehow comes out on top. In the hands of Shakespeare's master literalists, the gravedigger and Feste, this tension is able to produce not only laughs but also profound insights into the conditions of embodiment.

I have noted that the technique is particularly effective in plays whose major characters live the life of the mind. In his opening speech Hamlet claims to have "that within which passeth show," and as the play develops he continues to guard the heart of his mystery (1.2.85). It is only in the final act that Hamlet stops speaking in soliloquy and engages with the material world—a change brought about in large part by the gravedigger. The confusion begins with their first exchange: "Whose grave's this, sirrah?" "Mine, sir" (5.1.107–09). Hamlet inquires about the grave's final cause but receives an answer in terms of efficient and material ones. He recognizes that he has finally met his conversational match. "How absolute the knave is! We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us" (126–27). George Kittredge glossed Hamlet's "absolute" as "insistent on accuracy in language" (147). But it is a peculiar kind of accuracy the gravedigger seeks—one that insists on literal meanings when the abstract alone seems to make sense.

The gravedigger's greatest act of absolute knavery comes in discussing the prince's madness. "How came he mad?" Hamlet asks, only to receive the tautological "Faith, e'en with losing his wits." Endeavoring to speak by the card, or with clearly defined terms, he tries again: "Upon what ground?" The gravedigger, at his literal best, answers, "Why, here in Denmark" (5.1.144–49). Hamlet demands a cause, a formal reason for his madness; but the gravedigger responds with a place. What might seem an evasion of the question is in fact a deeper answer than Hamlet could have expected. It was rotten Denmark, and seedy Elsinore in particular—with its paranoia, surveillance, and acoustic violence—that was the breeding ground of Hamlet's madness. His question contained its own answer; he had only to reinterpret his "ground" more literally to understand the relation of his mind to his environment. The question of madness is best answered in terms not of formal or final causes but of material ones. The gravedigger shows him that "Why did I go mad?" is a less useful question than "Where did I go mad?"

His absolute knavery takes us well beyond the realm of the "twice-true metaphor." It is not that *ground* means two things simultaneously—cause and physical ground. Hamlet intends only the abstract sense and the gravedigger only the literal. Nor is it a question of historical phenomenology, whereby our cultural assumptions do not allow us to hear a literal sense that Shakespeare's audience would have heard. Hamlet does not hear his own material meaning, and it takes this act of perverse literalism to make him really listen. In a fascinating chapter of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant discusses the difference between schematic representation,

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where an intuition is immediately given to a concept, and the symbolic, where no sensible intuition is available and the understanding must proceed by analogy. "Our language is full of such indirect presentations," he claims, and the first example he cites is "*Grund*" (226). Kant notes that the problem "deserves a deeper investigation," which was later carried out by Martin Heidegger in *Der Satz vom Grund*, a published series of thirteen lectures. The title is virtually untranslatable. It has been rendered as both *The Principle of Reason* and *The Principle of Ground*—understandably, as Heidegger meditates throughout on both senses of *Grund* and their strange points of collusion.[4] Reginald Lilly's solution is to translate *Grund* as "reason" in the first several lectures, then to gravitate toward "ground," finally using "ground/reason" to ensure that the reader hears both simultaneously.

Heidegger explores this historical doubleness of *Grund*—"'ground' as footing and earth and 'Reason' as perception and hearing"—to understand how being can be ground-like (102). His inquiry leads him, in the sixth lecture, to consider the relation of metaphor and metaphysics. The idea of metaphor "is based upon the distinguishing, if not complete separation, of the sensible and the nonsensible as two realms that subsist on their own. The setting up of this partition between the sensible and the nonsensible, between the physical and the nonphysical is a basic trait of what is called metaphysics and which normatively determines Western thinking." Heidegger claims that the "metaphorical exists only within metaphysics" and that we can undermine both by realizing that this partition between the physical and nonphysical is "insufficient" (48). At their best, this is what Shakespeare's masters of misprision urge us to consider when they awaken the sleeping material truths in everyday figures of speech. But Heidegger's inquiry, like Paster's, is an exercise in historical phenomenology. It relies on listening to the subtle modulations of meaning across centuries, from the Greeks and Romans to early modern and modern Europeans. When Shakespeare stages his own inquiry into "ground," he condenses it into an instant—a sudden clash between Hamlet's abstract causes and the dirt the gravedigger hurls with his spade.

Hamlet's interaction with the gravedigger is framed by the rethinking of the physical's relation to the nonphysical. As Hamlet and Horatio come upon the men at work, Hamlet asks if one of them, who is singing while he digs, has "no feeling of his business"; Horatio replies, "Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness" (5.1.61–63). The gravediggers have built up a kind of mental resistance to death, analogous to the physical resistance of a tanner's body, which, the gravedigger explains, lasts a year longer than anyone else's, since "his hide is so tanned with his trade that a will keep out water a great while" (157–58). Mary Crane remarks, "Like the gravediggers themselves, only in a more fundamental way, the tanner has been shaped by his occupation" (144). Hamlet wanted desperately to know where we go when we shuffle off this mortal coil. The gravedigger is more interested in the fate of the coil. Crane's description, "in a more fundamental way," echoes the gravedigger's wisdom in pointing us back to the material ground that shapes our living interactions with the world and apparently our dead ones as well.

In the work of these clowns, the act of meaning something "literally" becomes a trope in its own right—a way of turning back to the material world whose links with our figures of speech have become severed. On its surface this sounds a bit like Donald Davidson's claim that "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (32). But Davidson's focus on the literal meaning of metaphors is merely a first step in the metaphoric process, in which that patent falsity of the literal inaugurates a search for alternative

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ways of noticing the world. Davidson, that is, rejects Richards's notion that metaphor involves two terms that share a common "ground" and removes them from the realm of truth-conditional statements. Shakespeare's literalists agree with Davidson in rejecting the idea that metaphors are grounded in similarity, but they insist that metaphors do contain truths and that those truths reside on the level of the literal. In literalizing Hamlet's "ground," the gravedigger rejects the idea of a cognitive space joining two dissimilar experiences. He wants to see how much the literal can do on its own, to what extent substance can embody significance in a manner closer to metonymy than to the less grounded substitutions of metaphor.

I have claimed that the products of perverse literalism range from the silly to the sublime—from the groan-worthy pun to the existential thrill of realizing that we have been speaking more truly than we intended in our everyday figures of speech. I should add that within the category of the sublime we can distinguish between tragic and comic instances. The melancholy prince may be wiser for his interaction with the gravedigger, but he is not happier. To some extent, one's response to perverse literalism depends on one's view of matter and its capabilities. When Hamlet loses his belief in the internal thing that "passeth show," he is left contemplating only lifeless remains—the inglorious ends of Alexander, Caesar, and Yorick. He leaps from the life of the mind to the corpse without pausing to explore the middle ground of the thinking body that is the focus of much work in phenomenology, the cognitive sciences, and the new materialisms. I will end with the comic master of perverse literalism, *Twelfth Night*'s Feste, who reveals better than any of Shakespeare's other clowns the profound joys of the literal arts.

Feste announces his status as a professional literalist by insisting that he is not Lady Olivia's fool but her "corrupter of words" (3.1.31). His interaction with Viola in the third act is a master class in misprision. When Viola asks if he lives by his tabor, Feste replies, "No, sir, I live by the church" (3). Viola then reasonably asks if he is a churchman, but Feste tells her, "No such matter, sir. I do live by the church for I do live at my house, and my house doth stand by the church" (5–6). As in the gravedigger's "ground," the joke is in the spatial jolt—the sudden shift from the ablative to the locative sense of *by*. Unlike Hamlet, Viola seems to enjoy this perverse literalism: "So thou mayst say the king lies by a beggar if a beggar dwell near him, or the church stands by thy tabor if thy tabor stand by the church" (7–9). Feste is excited by her progress: "You have said, sir. To see this age!—A sentence is but a cheverel glove to a good wit, how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward." (10–12). Feste's glove is a fit emblem for the kind of literalism he practices. In the hands of the perverse literalist, common figures of speech are turned inside out, foregrounding their physical and spatial senses.

To thank Feste, Viola gives him a coin, and then, after some additional begging, another. He then tells her, "My lady is within, sir. I will conster to them whence you come. Who you are and what you would are out of my welkin—I might say 'element', but the word is over-worn" (49–52). What does Feste do here in replacing the common figure of speech "out of my element" with the unheard-of "out of my welkin"? *Welkin*, as the editors of *The Norton Shakespeare* note, is "synonymous with one meaning of 'element,'" the physical sense of air or sky, but not with its more abstract sense (1794n7). At some point, "out of my element" must have been a strange, living metaphor, as seemingly incongruous as "out of my welkin." But common usage has worn away that strangeness and the now lexicalized phrase has taken on its own proper meaning. Both Jacques Derrida and Ricoeur describe this process as the *Aufhebung* moment of metaphor—when terms

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originally drawn from the sensible realm take on a proper spiritual meaning (Derrida 25; Ricoeur 285–86). "*Begreifen*," to understand, becomes a philosophical concept only by losing its sense of physical grasping (*greifen*); or, as Ricoeur puts it, turning to the French equivalent of *begreifen*, "'Comprendre' can have a proper philosophical sense because we no longer hear 'prendre' in it" (293). Ricoeur follows Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in seeing the loss of the physical dimension of a term's meaning as a positive move. The wearing away of a sensible term creates new meaning in the raising up of the concept. *Element*, no longer tethered to the material world, is free to signify a number of abstract ideas. But Derrida is more interested in the process of wearing away, as was Friedrich Nietzsche when he wrote that truths were merely "metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigor, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins" (146). The job of a literalist like Feste is to remind us that our abstract concepts are indeed human coinage, by recalling the sensuous stamp that has been worn away. One way of doing this, as Ricoeur notes, is to substitute for the overworn word a "synonym that suggests an image" (292)—as Feste does when he replaces "element" with "welkin." This is how the corrupter of words earns his keep, and his coins.

I have described this scene as a master class in misprision, and Viola gives every indication of being a quick study. In her opening exchange with Feste, the word *stand* appears three times—the house "stands" by the church, and the church "stands" by the tabor if the tabor "stand[s]" by the church. In each iteration the emphasis is on the literal standing forth of the object. When Viola replies to Feste's request for more coinage with "I understand you, sir," she inaugurates a shift from "stand" to "understand" that is crucial to the next part of the scene, where Viola takes over as corrupter of words in her interaction with Sir Toby. When Sir Toby invites Viola to enter and meet with Olivia, she replies, "I am bound to your niece, sir: I mean she is the list of my voyage" (3.1.69–70). She is bound to Olivia, not by contract or loyalty, but in the spatial sense that Olivia is the destination of her journey. Sir Toby then tells her, "Taste your legs, sir, put them to motion," to which Viola replies, "My legs do better understand me, sir, than I understand what you mean by bidding me taste my legs" (3.1.71–73). Viola refuses the figurative extension of the term by pointing to the greater certainty of the literal: *My legs understand me*, she insists; *they stand under me, but I in no way stand under what you've said*. She insists on hearing the *stand* in *understand*. The average English speaker may use *understand* thousands of times without hearing its physical grounding, but even one perverse usage is enough to awaken this sense, as when John Bunyan writes, "I have sometimes seen more in a line of the Bible then I could well tell how to stand under" (93). In the case of the compound English word it is enough to reverse its two components, to turn the glove inside out, and to reveal the stamp worn away by common speech.

The primary metaphor linking physical manipulation with understanding is, according to Eve Sweetser, "absolutely pervasive" (28). It belongs to a larger semantic system she calls the "Mind-as-Body Metaphor," which is "very probably *motivated* by correlations between our external experience and our internal emotional and cognitive states" (30). She notes, for example, how "bright colors do indeed help promote 'bright' moods" (29). But Sweetser rightly adds that the metaphoric mappings become fuller and more complex than the original correlations. Not all complex cognitive experiences can simply be reduced to some extension of the physical; rather, an experiential correlation can sometimes be awakened, by accident or wit, and then used to measure and even restrain its metaphoric extensions. Feste and the

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gravedigger return metaphors to their experiential grounds, insisting that they stand or fall by how true they are to the embodied experiences that give rise to them.

These literalists' work is "perverse" because it resists the ability of metaphor to elaborate concepts that are not tied to the workings of the body. But recent studies suggest that, to the extent that they succeed, Shakespeare's clowns are tapping into something that occurs naturally, though unconsciously, in the processing of metaphors. Benjamin Bergen describes an experiment by psychologists at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in which subjects were first trained to perform certain actions, such as swallowing or making a grasping motion, when a symbol appeared on a screen (199–201). The subjects were then shown metaphoric phrases and told to press the space bar on a keyboard when they understood them. Comprehension was faster when the metaphors corresponded with actions just performed. So "swallow your pride" was easier to understand after subjects had made the swallowing action and "grasp the concept" after they had performed the grasping motion. Results were the same even when the subjects were asked not to perform but merely to imagine performing those actions. Bergen concludes, "Perhaps you interpret metaphorical language quasi-literally—rendering the concrete things and actions it describes in embodied simulations that you use in understanding the actual abstract concepts" (199). Perhaps, too, we should rethink Ricoeur's claim that we no longer hear the *prendre* in *comprendre*. Gibbs writes that "when hearing 'grasp the concept' listeners engage in, or imagine engaging in, a relevant body action, such as grasping, that facilitates metaphorical construal of the abstract notion of 'concept' as a kind of physical entity, such that concepts can indeed be things that are grasped, held on to, dropped, misplaced, chewed on, and so on" ("Metaphor Interpretation" 441–42).

Other studies yield even more surprising results. The psychologists Nils Jostmann, Daniël Lakens, and Thomas W. Schubert ran a series of experiments investigating the connection between conceptual importance and physical heaviness. In one of them, subjects asked to guess the value of various currencies were more likely to give high estimates when holding a heavy clipboard and low estimates when holding a light one. Variations on the experiment yielded similar results, leading the psychologists to speculate on the "intriguing possibility . . . that the abstract concept of importance is still grounded in sensory experiences of weight" (1169). Along similar lines, Bergen discusses the "ingenious study" of Lawrence Williams and John Bargh, in which subjects were asked to make a judgment about the friendliness of an imaginary person: "They found that people who were given physically warm cups of coffee thought that the imaginary person was more generous, happy, and sociable—attributes that are described in terms of warmth—but not stronger or more honest, which are not described in terms of warmth" (214). A follow-up experiment asked subjects to hold a hot or cold compress and afterward to choose between a reward for themselves and a gift for a friend. As the researchers had hypothesized, those who had held the hot pad were far more likely to choose the "interpersonally warmer option" of the gift for a friend (Williams and Bargh 606–07). When John Searle pondered the relation between a cold object and a "cold" person, he concluded that there simply was no empirical link: "The notion of being cold just is associated with being unemotional" (97). The experiments of Williams and Bargh show that that relation may be more experientially grounded than Searle imagined.

It is fascinating, on the one hand, to find evidence that primary metaphors such as "Heavy Is Important" and "Warmth Is Kindness" have not been entirely uprooted from their experiential grounds. On the other hand,

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it is alarming to think that such physical stimuli can subconsciously guide our evaluation and decision-making. I suspect that Hamlet would be depressed, and Feste excited, by these experiments. But whatever our reaction, we must recognize that the literal and physical senses of even our most common metaphors survive as a kind of echo in the phenomenology of metaphor. These experiments, along with the theories of Müller, Grady, and Bergen, should prompt cognitive scientists to think more deeply about the relations among conceptual metaphors, the embodied experiences that give rise to them, and the speakers who instantiate them. Conceptual metaphors, however deeply entrenched, retain their links with the physical world. Eccentric speakers can suddenly awaken even the most profoundly sleeping metaphors, foregrounding material domains that may have gone unnoticed over countless iterations. And if they are successful teachers, like Feste, they can influence the future iterations of those figures, altering the trajectory of their meaning.

But these findings run up against the strong antiliteralist strain of some earlier work in the cognitive sciences—the insistence that metaphors will get us into silliness if we take them too literally or that, as Johnson puts it, "literalism . . . which claims that all of our meaningful concepts can be spelled out literally, is false, misleading, and dangerous" (280). It is important, however, to be clear about what kind of literalism is being rejected. The antiliteralism of Lakoff and Johnson is directed against truth-conditional or context-free literalism—the kind one finds in the analytic philosophy of Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, and Alfred Jules Ayer. In Shakespearean terms this form of literalism is closest to Shylock's belief in a pure and unequivocal referentiality, the kind of impoverished literalism that sees metaphysics as nonsensical and Heidegger in particular as producing "sentences which fail to conform to the conditions under which alone a sentence can be literally significant" (Ayer 35). Too many philosophers, Johnson writes, are "captivated by the dream of a pristine language—a language of carefully defined literal concepts free from the alleged taint of bodily processes" (222). But this is not the kind of vocabulary that perverse literalism creates. Turning the glove inside out offers a profoundly corporeal literalism—one that shows how physical process, understood generously enough, can account for much of what has been relegated to immateriality and abstraction.

In searching for a better definition of the literalism of Shakespeare's clowns, we might turn to the phenomenologist whose work has most directly inspired recent cognitive scientists—Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty considers the relation of metaphor to the sensible and nonsensible or, in his terms, the visible and invisible. Seeing, speaking, and thinking, he writes, "have a name in all languages, but a name which in all of them also conveys significations in tufts, thickets of proper meanings and figurative meanings," which, unlike the terms of science, do not offer "a circumscribed signification" (*Visible* 130). In claiming that Shakespeare's clowns insist on the literal sense of dead metaphors, we should understand *sense* as Merleau-Ponty's *sens*—not a stable referent but a vector of thought and meaning. These perverse literalists do not insist on the literal *over* the figurative but show how the more abstract senses of words and phrases can be tied back to the material world from which they were elaborated—implicating literal and figurative into an inextricable "tuft" of meaning.

If we take "literal sense" as this act of bending meaning back toward our embodied experiences, no one illustrates the power of that gesture better than Merleau-Ponty. *Literally* is literally one of his favorite words. In *Phenomenology of Perception* he insists that "we literally are what others think of us" (146), that the typist "literally incorporates the space of the keyboard into his bodily

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space" (109), that the aphasic "literally remains without a voice" (166), that "our senses literally interrogate . . . things" (333), and that "sensation is, literally, a communion" (219). The word is sprinkled throughout his writing as liberally as it is in the conversations of modern teenagers, from his early work to his final essay, "Eye and Mind," where he insists that we "must take literally what vision teaches us" (187) and that when we speak of "inspiration" "the word should be taken literally" (167). Merleau-Ponty understood *literally* as a trope in its own right—a way of aiming at the material world and showing that the literal has a grip (*prise*) on it stronger than that of any dead metaphor. Nowhere does he employ that trope more powerfully than in his unfinished attempt to describe the "flesh of the world" in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Not surprisingly, he insists that this term "is no analogy or vague comparison and must be taken literally" (133). In one of his working notes, he elaborates on what he means: "A 'direction' of thought—This is not a metaphor—There is no metaphor between the visible and the invisible" (221). Like Heidegger, he objects to thinking of metaphor as bridging two distinct realms but also resists their collapse into a naive monism. Merleau-Ponty's literalism is not the mere return to an already understood literal sense but the creation of a new, dynamic *sens* in which flesh strives to embody its own significance. Or, as Donald Landes puts it, meaning for Merleau-Ponty is "always *between* and *around* the figurative and the literal" (37).

All this may seem a long way from the oft-lamented habit of adding *literally* before common figurative statements. But is it? If by *literally* the casual speaker signals an unusual investment in a dead metaphor and asks us to understand it "in the strongest admissible way," perhaps we should take this not merely as error but as an invitation to investigate what that strongest admissible way entails. Many cases will lead to silliness, but some will point to a more generous understanding of the original grounds of the figure of speech, and we would be remiss to ban the word entirely from our vocabularies. I suspect the browser plug-in mentioned earlier would simply shut down if faced with a text by Merleau-Ponty. How could it possibly decide whether such instances were correct or incorrect? It could not, because these usages do not refer to a fixed sense but are rather a direction of thought and meaning—language in the act of bending back to the world to interrogate the conditions of embodied experience.

I might end by proposing this trope as a tool for current writers on embodiment, but, as heirs of Merleau-Ponty, many have already discovered it even if they have not theorized its usage. When Maxine Sheets-Johnston describes the kinesthetic basis of our self-knowledge, she claims, "We literally discover ourselves in movement" (136). When Shaun Gallagher discusses the role of movement in infant perception, he insists, "More precisely, and quite literally, we can see our own possibilities in the faces of others" (1). Andy Clark envisions "human cognition quite literally bleeding out into body and world" (70) and describes "new equipment" becoming "quite literally incorporated" into our minds and bodies (31). And in her new-materialist reading of quantum physics, Karen Barad insists that the cascade experiment is "more than a metaphor" and that we should read its implications as literally as possible, since "matter and meaning, the literal and the figurative, are never as separate as we like to pretend" (362).[5]

In all these cases, *literally* asks us to pause and listen for the materiality lurking beneath our everyday figures of speech. Like Antonio, we might be surprised to find that a phrase uttered countless times as nothing more than a dead metaphor can suddenly take hold of the world in wonderful or terrifying ways, showing us that we have all along been speaking more truly than we intended. What the literature of embodiment illustrates

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is what Shakespeare's clowns discovered centuries ago—that unmaking metaphors can be just as meaningful as making them.

Notes

1. Gibbs has identified five distinct senses of *literality* in cognitive linguistics alone (*Poetics* 75).

2. F. Elizabeth Hart and Donald Freeman each focus on cognitive metaphor in the Lakoff and Johnson tradition; Amy Cook looks specifically at conceptual-blending theory. Raphael Lyne adopts a more character-focused approach. Naomi Rokotnitz's work discusses bodily knowledge in the actors and audience and explores questions of skepticism and trust. Mary Crane uses her readings of the plays to shed light on the workings of the author's brain, while Philip Davis is interested in the brains of readers and how they are shaped by the dynamic life force that materializes in Shakespeare's language.

3. See also Lyne's discussion of metaphor's ability to shade into a collection of synecdoches (28–67). His book, however, is more interested in the conceptual side of metaphor than in its embodiment.

4. All quotations from *Der Satz vom Grund* are taken from Reginald Lilly's translation, *The Principle of Reason*.

5. The cascade experiment refers to the work of the IBM physicist Don Eigler and his lab, which created a computer-chip circuit one trillionth of an inch in size by using a scanning tunneling microscope to initiate a "molecule cascade" akin to a series of dominoes. In her reading of this work, Barad explains that the cascade is not simply a handy metaphor for the rapid and unpredictable development of nanotechnologies but a miniature enactment of that phenomenon (353–64). The rearrangement of atoms holds "the literal potential" to "initiate a chain reaction . . . that will fan out and explode into a host of new technologies" (362).

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