

Reuven Tsur

Metaphor and Figure–Ground Relationship: Comparisons from Poetry, Music, and the Visual Arts

Abstract

The gestalt notion “figure–ground phenomenon” refers to the characteristic organisation of perception into a figure that ‘stands out’ against an undifferentiated background. What is figural at any one moment depends on patterns of sensory stimulation and on the momentary interests of the perceiver. Figure–ground relationship is an important element of the way we organise reality in our awareness, including works of art. Poets may rely on our habitual figure–ground organisations in extra-linguistic reality to exploit our flexibility in shifting attention from one aspect to another so as to achieve certain poetic effects by inducing us to reverse the habitual figure–ground relationships. This flexibility has precedent in music and the visual arts. Works by Escher, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Dickinson, Sidney, Shelley, Beckett and Alterman are examined.

Keywords: gestalt; metaphor; figure–ground; Emily Dickinson; P. B. Shelley; Sir Philip Sidney; Bach, Mozart; Beethoven; M. C. Escher; Samuel Beckett; Nathan Alterman;

Gestalt Rules of Figure–Ground

There was an old joke in Soviet Russia about a guard at the factory gate who at the end of every day saw a worker walking out with a wheelbarrow full of straw.¹ Every day he thoroughly searched the contents of the wheelbarrow, but never found anything but straw. One day he asked the worker: “What do you gain by taking home all that straw?” “The wheelbarrows”. This paper is about the straw and the wheelbarrow, about shifting attention from figure to ground or, rather, about turning into figure what is usually perceived as ground. We are used to think of the load as “figure”; the wheelbarrow is only “ground”, merely an instrument. Our default interest is in the act, not in the instrument.

One of Anton Ehrenzweig’s central claims in his seminal book *A Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* (1965) is that the contents of works of art is best approached in terms of psychoanalytic theory, while artistic form is best approached

¹ The sound files for this article are available online at <http://www.tau.ac.il/~tsurxx/FigureGround/Figure-groundLinks.html>

in terms of gestalt theory. He has most illuminating things to say on these both with reference to music and the visual arts. While I am not always convinced by his application of psychoanalysis to works of art, I find his discussions of gestalts and gestalt-free elements most compelling and illuminating. Gestalt theory has been systematically applied to the visual arts by Rudolf Arnheim (1957), to emotion and meaning in music by Leonard B. Meyer (1956). Cooper and Meyer (1960) applied it to the rhythmic structure of music. One of the earliest, and perhaps the most important application of gestalt theory to literature is Barbara Herrnstein-Smith's mind-expanding book *Poetic Closure* (1968). During the past three decades I devoted much research to poetic prosody; I have found that many of the aesthetically most interesting issues regarding poetic rhythm, rhyme patterns and stanza form can be understood only through having recourse to gestalt theory (e.g., Tsur, 1977; 1992: 111-179; 1998; Tsur et al., 1990, 1991, see now also Tsur, 2006: 115-141). In the present paper, however, I will explore figure-ground relationships in the projected, extra-linguistic world.

One of the most interesting issues in gestalt theory, both from the perceptual and the artistic point of view is what gestalt theorists called "figure-ground relationship". The *Fonatana Dictionary of Modern Thought* provides the following definition:

figure-ground phenomenon. The characteristic organization of perception into a figure that 'stands out' against an undifferentiated background, e.g. a printed word against a background page. What is figural at any one moment depends on patterns of sensory stimulation and on the momentary interests of the perceiver. See also GESTALT.

Look, for instance, at Figures 1a and b. In Figure 1a the pattern of sensory stimulation allows to see either a goblet or two faces; the perceiver may alternate between seeing the black area as figure and the white area as ground, or vice versa. In the doodle presented in Figure 1b, obviously, the four triangular shapes with the pairs of elliptical dots in them are the shapes; the white space between them is the ground. This is reinforced by the caption too. If, however, you shift attention to the white space in the middle, you will discover that it has the shape of a distinct "formée" cross which, in turn, will become the figure, relegating the triangular shapes into the background.

In this respect gestalt theorists discovered that some of the commonsense perceptual phenomena are not at all to be taken for granted as it would appear to the man in the street. They not only brought to attention a most interesting phenomenon, but also laid down rigorous rules that govern the perceptual organisation processes that result in figure-ground relationships. The better the shape, the more it tends to stand out as a figure (and there are rigorous principles that account for what makes a shape "better" or "worse").

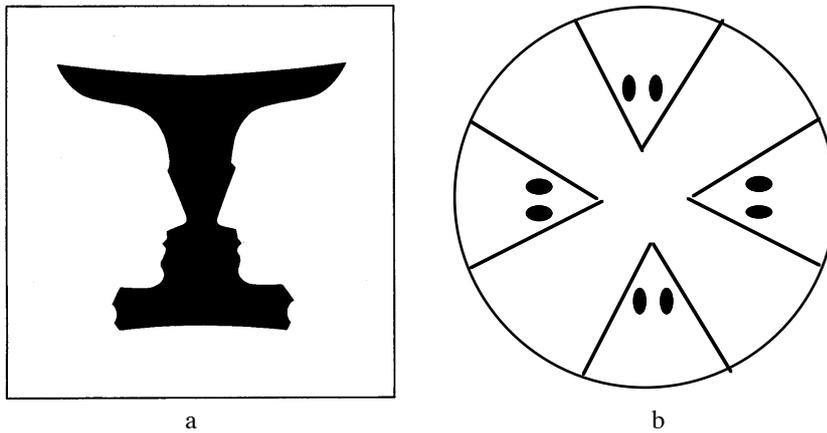


Figure 1a. You can either see as figure a black goblet standing in front of a white ground, or you can see two white faces, looking at each other, in front of a black ground.
 b. Four Ku Klux Klansmen looking down a well.

Let us just hint briefly at a few of the Gestalt laws of organisation relevant to Figure–Ground relationship (based on Hochberg, 1964: 86). (A) **Area**. The smaller a closed region, the more it tends to be seen as figure. Thus, as the area of the white cross decreases in Figure 2 from *a* to *b*, its tendency to be seen as figure increases. In figure 1a it is easier to see a black goblet against a continuous white ground than two faces against a black ground. (B) **Proximity**. Dots or objects that are close together tend to be grouped together into one figure. In Figure 3 the more or less evenly distributed dots constitute the ground; the figure, the enlarged print of the eye, is generated by similar dots packed more closely together. (C) **Closedness**. Areas with closed contours tend to be seen as figure more than do those with open contours. (D) **Symmetry**. The more symmetrical a closed region, the more it tends to be seen as figure. I have not specifically illustrated (C) and (D), but most of our examples in this paper illustrate them.

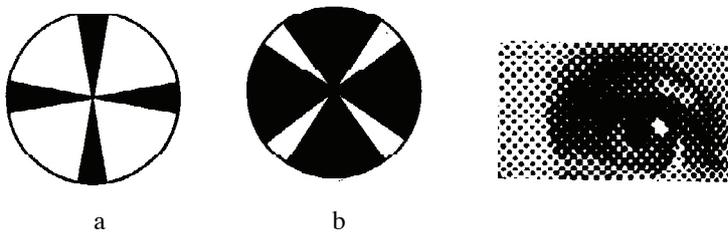


Figure 2

Figure 3

(E) **Good continuation**. That arrangement of figure and ground tends to be seen which will make the fewest changes or interruptions in straight or smoothly-

curving lines or contours. This is one of the most important of the laws of organisation. All three drawings in Figure 4 contain the digit 4, but one can discern it only in *b* and *c*. In *c* the ground consists of lines the arrangement of which makes as many changes and interruptions in straight or smoothly-curving lines as possible, foregrounding the straight lines and segregating the shape of the digit 4. In *a* and *b* the straight lines of the digit are part of the same smoothly-curving contour. Nevertheless, in *b* the digit is segregated and discernible, in *a* it is not. The reason is that in *a* the entire contour consists of a single solid line that constitutes a closed figure against an open white ground, concealing the digit, whereas in *b* the straight lines of the digit are in a solid line, the rest of the curve in a dotted line, rendering the continuation less good and the dots less close together, segregating the shape of the digit as a figure. The mere change of resolution turns one part of figure 4b into figure, the other into ground. The part in which the lines are straight and the dots closer to each other (i.e. the solid lines) emerges as figure.

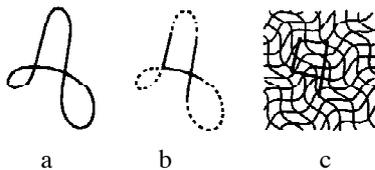


Figure 4

Of all the possible principles I would add to these one more. “Shape may [...] be regarded as a kind of stylistic ‘mean’ lying between the extremes of chaotic overdifferentiation and primordial homogeneity” (Meyer, 1957: 161). Good shapes tend to stand out as figures, whereas “primordial homogeneity” and “chaotic overdifferentiation” tend to be relegated to ground. The minute curves with their changing directions in Figure 4c may serve as a rudimentary example of overdifferentiation. Such overdifferentiation constitutes perceptual overload on the cognitive system, and is handled by dumping into the ground.

In Figure 1b the “triangles” are well-differentiated, closed shapes symmetrically distributed in the area; the pairs of dots further differentiate them. The caption reinforces our “interest” in them. The triangular areas are much smaller than the white space separating them. This space in the middle, however, yields a sufficiently symmetrical and closed shape to become figure when shifting attention to it. Once you discover this white cross, you find it difficult to suppress it. One key-term for the perceptual distinction between figure and ground is, then, “relative differentiation”. Partially overlapping good shapes both in music and the visual arts may blur each other so as to form a lowly-differentiated background. Even regularly repeated small good shapes (as in wallpapers) generate perceptual overload and are typically dumped in the background. Irregularly distributed lines and dots suggest chaotic overdifferentiation and make a rather poor shape; but, as we shall see soon,

when they occur within the closed area of a shape, they render it more differentiated relative to other similar shapes and tend to shift it in the *figure* direction.

There seems to be a crucial difference between the visual and the other modes of perception. "It is difficult, if not impossible, even to imagine a visual figure without also imagining the more continuous, homogeneous ground against which it appears. But in 'aural space', in music, there is no given ground; there is no necessary, continuous stimulation, against which all figures must be perceived" (Meyer, 1956: 186).

Due to the absence of a necessary, given ground in aural experience, the mind of the listener is able to organize the data presented to it by the senses in several different ways. The musical field can be perceived as containing: (1) a single figure without any ground at all, as, for instance, in a piece for solo flute; (2) several figures without any ground, as in a polyphonic composition in which the several parts are clearly segregated and are equally, or almost equally, well shaped; (3) one or sometimes more than one figure accompanied by a ground, as in a typical homophonic texture of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries; (4) a ground alone, as in the introduction to a musical work--a song, for instance--where the melody or figure is obviously still to come; or (5) a superimposition of small motives which are similar but not exactly alike and which have little real independence of motion, as in so-called heterophonic textures (Meyer, 1956: 186).²

In a series of brilliant experiments Al Bregman demonstrated the principles of gestalt grouping in the auditory mode. In his first example he demonstrated the principles of "Proximity" and "Area". The sequence used in the first demonstration consists of three high and three low tones, alternating high and low tones. When the cycle is played slowly, one can clearly hear the alternation of high and low tones. When it is played fast, one experiences two streams of sound, one formed of high tones, the other of low ones, each with its own melody, as if two instruments, a high and a low one, were playing along together. When the sequence is played fast, the tones are in greater proximity, occupy a smaller area in the "auditory space". The Law of Proximity works here in two ways. In the fast sequence the tones are "nearer" together in time than in the slow one; and the higher tones are "nearer" to each other in pitch than to the lower ones. Consequently, they organise themselves into two segregated but concurrent figures, each in its own register.

² Meyer uses the term "ground" within gestalt theory. It should be noted that in music theory this term has a technically defined, somewhat different sense. This difference of senses may be one source of the disagreement reported below between Harai Golomb and myself.

[Listen online to the demo experiment:](#)

Al Bregman's Demo CD	Explanation of Example	Go straight to Sound file 01	Sound file 01 amplified
--	--	--	---

In his works for unaccompanied cello and violin Bach experimented with exploiting the gestalt rules of perception and figure–ground relationships for generating polyphonic music on a single string instrument. When we say that two melodic lines occur *at the same time*, much depends on how long is *the same time*, that is, what is the duration of the “immediate present”. How does Bach fool the listener into thinking that he hears more than one line at a time? In respect of poetic prosody I have argued that the span of “the same time” is determined by the span of short-term memory. That might apply to Bach’s music too.

Music Excerpt 1

[Listen to an excerpt from Menuet I from Bach’s Unaccompanied Violin Partita No. 3 in E major.](#)

Music Excerpt 2

[Listen to an excerpt from Fuga alla breve from Bach’s Unaccompanied Violin Sonata No. 3 in C major.](#)

Music Excerpt 3

[Listen to an excerpt from Menuett from Bach's Unaccompanied Cello Suite No. 2 in D minor.](#)

To impute unity on his different melodic lines, Bach relies on the gestalt principles of **proximity** (generating harmony and counterpoint by way of restricting each melody to its own discrete register) and **good continuation** within each register. Just as in Bregman's demonstrations, here too the higher and lower tones organise themselves into two simultaneous melodic lines, within the constraints of short-term memory and the gestalt rules of grouping. In this way he generates in excerpts 1 and 3 a melodic line plus a background texture. In excerpt 2 he accomplishes the feat of a fugue on a single string instrument, in which the melodic line in the second voice appropriately begins in the middle of the melody in the first voice. Technically, this works as follows. The melody of the fugue sounds something like **taa–TAM–tataRAMpampam**; and so forth. The two long notes **taa–TAM–** are simple enough to be played simultaneously with a more complex, faster melody (**tataRAMpampam**) in the other register. At the same time, it is grouped into a single figure with the ensuing **tataRAMpampam** section in its own register; which, in turn, coincides—according to the rules of the fugue—with the two long notes in the other register.

In literature the figure–ground phenomenon is not at all easy to track; and sometimes, as in music, it does not seem to exist. The socio-linguist William Labov

(1972) made an ingenious attempt to utilise this notion with reference to narratives. He pointed out that certain grammatical forms tend to relegate descriptions to a static ground, while some other grammatical forms tend to “foreground” the action of the narrative, which is the perceptual figure. One of the sad results of Labov’s technique —for which he certainly cannot be blamed— is that quite a few linguists and literary critics who ignore the gestaltist origin of these notions “diagnose” figure and ground in a text by applying Labov’s grammatical categories quite mechanically, without asking whether a ground does exist at all in a given text. Labov’s own practice is far from “labelling”; it is, indeed, highly functional: it uses linguistic categories to trace the transformation of experience into story grammar. It should be noted that Labov uses these notions in a much wider context, in which figure–ground relationship is only one, and not the most important, aspect. He is more interested in means *for evaluating experience in story-telling*. I shall not elaborate here on this matter.

Such theorists as Arnheim, Meyer and Ehrenzweig make illuminating comments on the dynamics of figure–ground relationship in their respective art media. I have elsewhere discussed at considerable length the figure–ground relationship in a passage by Milton resulting from an interplay between prosodic and syntactic gestalts and gestalt-free elements in the “world stratum” of the work, in an attempt to account for what Ants Oras (1957) described as perceptual “depth” (Tsur, 1977: 180-189; 1991: 85-92). In prosodic and syntactic structures too, good gestalts, strong shapes, tend to yield figures; where strong shapes blur each other or interact with gestalt-free qualities, they tend to blend in a ground. In this paper I am going to explore the manipulation of figure–ground relationships in the represented (or “projected”) world.

To indicate the flexibility of such phenomena in painting and music, I will quote here two short passages on colour interaction from another book by Ehrenzweig.

The incisiveness of form, such as the comparative sharpness of its outline, or its pregnant shape, or the conflict or parallelism between superimposed or juxtaposed forms and so on, can be summed up as qualities of a ‘good’ gestalt. We can summarize therefore that colour interaction between figure and ground stands in inverse proportion to the good gestalt of the figure (Ehrenzweig, 1970: 172).

He also indicates how the same notes in music may oscillate between ground and figure. Meyer suggested above that the musical field can be perceived as containing “several figures without any ground, as in a polyphonic composition *in which the several parts are clearly segregated and are equally, or almost equally, well shaped*”. Ground enters into the composition as soon as the demands of the italicised portion of this formulation are considerably relaxed.

To the extent to which a musical note is fitted into a clean melodic ‘line’ it is prevented from fusing into harmonic tone ‘colour’; conversely a strong chord will temporarily fuse the loose strands of polyphony into solid tone

colour so that the separate melodic lines disappear altogether. I have mentioned that the ear constantly oscillates between the harmonic fusion and polyphonic separation of the melodic lines; this conflict between ‘form’ and ‘colour’ belongs to the very life of music. A harmonically too luscious piece will soon lose its impact if it is not poised against a tough polyphonic structure (Ehrenzweig, 1970: 173).

This typically unstable relationship between figure and ground in painting and music must be borne in mind when we discuss those relationships in the verbal arts. In my book on “Kubla Khan” (Tsur, 2006: 223), for instance, I pointed out the similarity of these structures discussed by Ehrenzweig to certain poetic structures:

What I have elsewhere called “convergent” and “divergent” style displays, with the necessary changes, exactly the same kind of dynamics. In the former, stressed syllables typically converge with strong, unstressed syllables with weak positions; alliterating sound patterns typically converge with stressed syllables in strong positions; sentence endings typically converge with line endings, yielding a clear versification line. In the latter there is a tendency of the same elements to diverge and blur each other, very much like “the loose strands of polyphony” in a “strong chord”. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Schneider pointed out [in “Kubla Khan”] similar dynamics of such convergent alliteration patterns as “ceaseless turmoil seething,” “mazy motion,” “river ran” etc., which are “partly concealed by the interlacing of other patterns” (she even uses the same verb as Ehrenzweig, “oscillate”).

Figure and Ground in Escher

Such artists as M. C. Escher deliberately experiment with the figure–ground phenomenon in visual perception. Escher himself described the organising principle of Figure 6 (and similar drawings) as follows:

In each case there are three stages to be distinguished. The first stage is the reverse of the final stage,—that is, a white object on a black background as against a black object on a white background. The second stage is intermediary between the two, and is the true, complete division of the plane, in which the opposing elements are equal (Escher, 1992: 164).

One may observe three points in Escher’s experiments relevant to our problem. First, though according to gestalt theory the better the shape the more it is likely to be perceived as “figure”, sometimes the same shapes may serve as figure or as ground. Additional differentiating devices seem to be at work. Second, the dots and lines on some shapes seem to serve as such “differentiating devices” that may turn them into “figure” (some of the fish have lines on one fin, and no lines on the other,

which turns them half figure, half ground, emerging, as it were, from “nowhere”). In one instance in Figure 5, one single dot within the area (indicating, as it were, the eye of the “bird”) slightly shifts the shape in the direction of “figure”. Third, with very little conscious effort we can almost freely switch from one organisation to another, sending figure shapes to the ground and vice versa. At the right end of Figure 6, for instance, the eye oscillates between seeing the white patches as schematic fish or a continuous shapeless background to the black fish; at the left end, conversely, the black patches can be seen as schematic fish or a continuous background to differentiated white fish.



Figure 5. Escher: Liberation

Now, as I said, William Labov imported this distinction into linguistic description. Very much in harmony with common sense and intuition, he pointed out (in

the stories he collected in Harlem on a “memorable fight”) that certain grammatical forms tend to foreground information as “figure”, and some tend to relagate it into the “ground”. It would be worth one’s effort to investigate, in a separate study, how the resulting mental images do or do not preserve the gestalt rules for visual perception. But this is a relative matter, and poets may turn the distinctions backside forward. At any rate, labelling objects as “agents” or “instruments” in isolation has nothing to do with the issue.



Figure 6. Escher: Woodcut II, strip 3.

Figure and Ground (?) in Emily Dickinson

In a forthcoming paper, “Poetry and the scope of metaphor: Toward a cognitive theory of literature”, Margaret H. Freeman discusses several poems by Emily Dickinson. In relation to one of them she discusses the nature of Time in language and poetry.

How do we understand time? It is commonly understood in two ways, depending on figure–ground orientation. That is, we can perceive time as a figure with respect to some ground, as when we say “Time flies when we’re having fun,” where time is seen as passing quickly across some given fun-filled space. Or we can perceive time as the ground for the figure, as when we say “The train arrived on time.” Both these ways of looking at time come from a very general metaphor in our thought processes: the EVENT STRUCTURE metaphor. [...] For example, a very common metaphor for time is TIME IS A HEALER. This metaphor for time depends on the EVENT STRUCTURE metaphor which entails EVENTS ARE ACTIONS, which in turn entails TIME IS AN OBJECT. The EVENT STRUCTURE metaphor is shaped by the notion of causality, in which an agent is understood to bring about an

event. Thus we say “Time heals all wounds.” But Dickinson rejects this metaphor:

They say that “Time
assuages” -
Time never did assuage -
An actual suffering
strengthens
As sinews do - with Age -

Time is a Test of
Trouble -
But not a Remedy -
If such it prove, it
prove too
There was no Malady -
Fascicle 38, H 163, 942 (J 686)

Let us confine our attention to the following aspect of Freeman’s discussion of time as an “EVENT STRUCTURE metaphor”: “we can perceive time as a figure with respect to some ground [...] or we can perceive time as the ground for the figure”. In harmony with our foregoing observations we might add that we can also perceive time as a figure with no ground at all. At any rate, such a conception as Freeman’s is most promising from the cognitive or the aesthetic point of view, because it offers terms with sufficient descriptive contents that allow us to make significant distinctions within a poetic text. That is, precisely, what she does in her following suggestion: “She rejects the idea of time as an agentive figure working against the ground of suffering and replaces it by reversing figure and ground. In the second part of the poem, it is suffering or “trouble” that is perceived as the figure against the ground of time”.

At the time of writing this paper we happened to be engaged in a lively correspondence on the application of cognitive science to poetry. On this issue I wrote to Freeman, among other things, this:

This is not quite accurate. In both instances (“Time is a healer of wounds” and “Time is a Test of Trouble”) we have, in M.A.K. Halliday’s terms, the same types of “relational clauses”, of the “attributive” kind. “The relation is one of class membership” (in these relational clauses the less general term is more abstract, unlike in “Marguerite is a poet”, where the two terms are of the same order of abstraction). In such relational clauses it seems to be impossible to make distinctions in terms of figure–ground relationship. In “Marguerite is a poet”, “poet” is not exactly ground for “Marguerite”: we do not perceive Marguerite in the front and “poet” in the background; we perceive “Marguerite *as* a poet”, as one figure. If, however, one insists that

“poet” is ground for “Marguerite”, then both “healer of wounds” and “a Test of Trouble” are ground for “Time”. Whether ground or not, they only differ in the *degree* of activity they attribute to the agent “Time”. But, in principle, if the text permits, very significant distinctions can be made in terms of figure–ground relationship.

Freeman gave the following answer to this comment: “The two expressions are not the same types of clauses. Time is a healer of wounds identifies Time as an agent; Time is a test of trouble identifies it as an instrument”.

According to the conception outlined above, there is no reason on earth why an instrument should not be granted the status of a figure. The question is not whether Time is identified as an agent or an instrument, but what kind of attention it attracts. Consider the following four sentences: “Time is a healer”, “Time assuages”, “Time is a Test of Trouble”, “Time is a Remedy”. In all of them Time is in the focus of our attention, while the various predicates attribute to it some kind (or degree) of activity. Consider the following two sentences: “Time is a healer”, and “Time is a Remedy”. They both attribute to Time the same kind of activity: it heals; but “healer” is said to be an agent, whereas “Remedy” is an instrument. In fact, dictionaries define “healer” as “one who or that which heals” -- that is, one can hardly tell whether the word suggests an agent or an instrument. “Time heals” expresses by a straightforward verb an activity that is expressed by nouns in the other two sentences; one cannot tell, however, whether it is an agent or an instrument; that is, whether it heals as a physician or as a remedy. What is more, “Time assuages” (which is after all the phrase used in the poem), may be perceived as “comforting, soothing, lessening pain” more as an ointment than as a person. Only one thing is certain: that in all these sentences, and especially where we have their cumulative effect in the poem, “Time” stands out as a figure; and I am not sure that there is a ground there at all.

Activities and Noun Metaphors

I will not discuss sentence types beyond what I have already done regarding their contribution to the figure–ground phenomenon. I will point out only one thing. According to Labov, verbs that express straightforward activity tend to foreground their referents as figures, whereas static nominal predicates tend to relegate their referents to the background. In Freeman’s foregoing examples, for instance, the things that are moving (“Time *flies*”, “The train *arrived*”) are said to be figure, whereas the things that are presented as a state are said to be ground (even though “having fun” may involve many straightforward activities: this kind of predicate relegates them to the ground). Now in metaphoric expressions one cannot take this for granted: noun phrases become effective means for expressing straightforward activity. One of the most fruitful insights of Christine Brooke-Rose in her *A Grammar of Metaphor* is that noun metaphors are much more effective in conveying figurative activities than verb metaphors.

In other words, whereas the noun is a complex of attributes, an action or attribute cannot be decomposed. Its full meaning depends on the noun with which it is used, and it can only be decomposed into species of itself, according to the noun with which it is associated: an elephant runs = runs heavily, a dancer runs = runs lightly.

Leaving adjectives aside for the moment, this means in fact two things. On the one hand, verbs are a more flexible element of language as far as meaning is concerned: that is, since they change their meaning slightly according to the noun with which they are used, they can also quickly extend their meaning and seem natural with each noun, so that an originally metaphoric use may rapidly cease to be metaphoric if the verb can be used in too many different senses with different nouns. On the other hand, when a verb is metaphoric, its adaptability to the noun is so great that its relationship to it is direct, and much stronger than its relationship to the action it is “replacing”. And it changes, by implication, that noun into something else (Brooke-Rose, 1958: 209).

The following quotations, by contrast, are from her discussion of the “genitive link”, but she claims to them a wider validity (“In a general sense, all noun metaphors are the result of some activity”).

All Genitive relationships are activity relationships, as I shall explain later. The body is called the hostel of the heart because the heart dwells or lodges there. The point about this type is that the metaphor changes another noun (heart becomes a lodger) and at the same time replaces an unmentioned proper term (body) (Brooke-Rose, 1958: 149).

With *of* in other relationships, I have constantly stressed its verbal element: [...] I have found that *of* can most successfully express the complete identity of the two linked nouns when the metaphor can very easily be turned into a verb: if love burns, it is a fire, if we give love, it is a gift, if death overshadows, it is a shade, etc. In a general sense, all noun metaphors are the result of some activity, but this has to be strongly felt when the grammatical link is artificial: *The fir of love* (*Tr.* I/436); the *shade* of death (*Am.* 17); in *flames* of pure and chaste desire (*Am.* 22); the *fyre* of love (*Am.* 81); thy *gift* of love (*Donne* 10) (Brooke-Rose, 1958: 155).

As I have suggested above, in the sentences “Time is a healer”, “Time assuages”, “Time is a Test of Trouble”, “Time is a Remedy” the verb predicate and the various kinds of noun predicates alike attribute some straightforward activity to Time, and present it as figure in the focus of attention. We cannot know from the text, in what way Time tests troubles: whether it actively puts troubles to a test, or merely turns

blue in bases and red in acids as the litmus paper. Nor can we know whether troubles are static as alkaline solutions and acids to be tested by some “litmus paper”, or are more active. One thing seems to be quite certain however: that the testing Time is the figure, and troubles are merely ground at best or, perhaps, part of the figure=action. Our attention is focussed on Time. In Emily Dickinson’s poem, “reified” Time is perceived as a figure, whether as an agent or an instrument. The figure–ground phenomenon is relational, and no labeling of isolated parts can illuminate it in any way.

Figure and Ground (?) in Shakespeare

Or let us take another example from Cognitive Linguistics. Peter Stockwell’s book on Cognitive Poetics has a chapter “Figures and Grounds” (Stockwell, 2002: 13–25). In what follows, I will reconsider one of his examples. In order to do this on Stockwell’s own terms, I have extracted from his chapter four criteria for perceiving some part of the perceptual field as figure:

1. A literary text uses stylistic patterns to focus attention on a particular feature, within the textual space. [...] In textual terms, [...] 'newness' is the key to attention (18)
2. The most obvious correspondence of the phenomenon of figure and ground is in the literary critical notion of foregrounding. [...] Foregrounding within the text can be achieved by a variety of devices, such as repetition, unusual naming, innovative descriptions, creative syntactic ordering, puns, rhyme, alliteration, metrical emphasis, the use of creative metaphor, and so on. All of these can be seen as deviations from the expected or ordinary use of language that draw attention to an element, foregrounding it against the relief of the rest of the features of the text (14).
3. In other words, attention is paid to objects which are presented in topic position (first) in sentences, or have focus, emphasis, focalisation or viewpoint attached to them (19).
4. Locative expressions [...] are expressed with prepositions that can be understood as image schemas [...] The image schemas underlying these prepositions all involve a dynamic movement, or at least a final resting position resulting from a movement [...]. For example, the title of Kesey's novel has a moving figure ('One') which can be pictured as moving from a position to the left of the ground ('the Cuckoo's Nest'), to a position above it, to end up at a position to the right of it. In this OVER image schema, the moving figure can be seen to follow a path above the ground. Within the image schema, though, the element that is the figure is called the trajector and the element it has a grounded relationship with is called the landmark (16).

Now consider the following passage.

Puck: How now, spirit! whither wander you?

Fairy: Over hill, over dale,

Thorough bush, thorough briar,

Over park, over pale,

Thorough flood, thorough fire,

I do wander everywhere

Swifter than the moone's sphere ...

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, William Shakespeare)

Figure or not, intuitively the Fairy's first four lines are exceptionally foregrounded. If we look at the first three criteria for perceiving some part of the perceptual field as figure, it will be evident why. According to the second criterion, foregrounding within the text can be achieved, among other things, by repetition, rhyme, alliteration, or metrical emphasis. Consider the anaphora in this passage. It certainly can be seen as a deviation from the expected or ordinary use of language. It consists of the repetition of two prepositions, *over* and *thorough*, four times each. This is certainly a device of repetition affecting foregrounding. The pairs of prepositional phrases introduced by "over" alternate with those introduced by "thorough"; thus one perceives a higher-level repetition pattern too. Semantically, the nouns governed by the prepositions, too, are perceived as repetitions, on a higher level of abstraction: all of them denote some space in nature, and suggest some opposition and difficulty to get through. In each line there are two roughly equal prepositional phrases, lending to it a symmetrical organisation. This symmetry is reinforced by another repetitive scheme, alliteration. In the first line, the two nouns end with the same speech sound: *hill-dale*. In the rest of the lines, each pair of nouns begins with the same speech sound: *bush-briar*; *park-pale*; *flood-fire*. By virtue of these nouns' place in the line, they reinforce symmetry and parallelism.

In harmony with criterion 3, the eight adverbials of place are topicalised—are dislocated from after the verb to the beginning of the sentence, brought into focus. This device is closely related to the one mentioned in criterion 1. The question "How now, spirit! whither wander you" mentions the agent ("trajector") and the fact that she is moving in space, but the adverb *whither* focuses attention on the yet unmentioned scene or destination of the motion. This is the new information in the answer.

I have suggested that these four lines are perceived as exceptionally prominent, are forced on the reader's or listener's attention; and that such perception can be accounted for by the first three of those criteria. Stockwell, by contrast, quotes the first five lines of the fairy's answer as a good example of the fourth criterion, and suggests that the moving person is the figure, the places enumerated—ground: "Trajector (I, the speaker Puck [*sic*]) takes a path flying above the landmark (hill, dale, park, pale)" (17). In view of my foregoing discussion, this is a rather

mechanical application of two notions: that scenery is typically perceived as ground; and that image schemas underlying some prepositions all involve a dynamic movement which, in turn, is perceived as figure.

Suppose that instead of writing a poetic drama, Shakespeare made a silent movie. In this case, quite plausibly, the flying shape of the fairy would be perceived as figure, the hills and dales etc. as ground. But “a literary text uses stylistic patterns to focus attention on a particular feature, within the textual space”. In the passage under discussion the stylistic patterns focus attention on the adverbials of place in the first four lines. The point is that Stockwell has rechristened the well-worn terms “foregrounding” and “deviations from the expected or ordinary use of language” as “figure–ground relationship”, which he further rechristened as “trajector and landmark” to make them conform with cognitive theory. In such descriptions, however, “trajector and landmark” apply, but “figure–ground relationship” does not necessarily apply, or applies differently. I strongly suspect that there is here no ground at all, though there are differences of relative emphasis. And what Stockwell rules as ground happens to be the most emphatic part.

Stockwell does not mention prosodic organisation. But in this case, the Gestalt Laws of perception noticeably affect it, significantly contributing to such perceptions. The first four lines have an alternating pattern of rhymes; the next two lines form a couplet. Both patterns yield strong, symmetrical Gestalts. But under the Gestalt Law of Proximity, the latter yields a stronger Gestalt than the former, capturing the reader’s or listener’s attention. That’s how it typically works in the Shakespearean Sonnet, for instance, yielding a concise, epigrammatic effect relative to the preceding quatrains. This effect ought to be reinforced here by the fact that the first four lines describe landscapes, whereas the ensuing lines describe actions. Notwithstanding this, if we examine the transition from the quatrain to the sequence of couplets, one must notice a most unexpected phenomenon. It is experienced as a transition from a more focused kind of attention to a more relaxed kind rather than vice versa.

One reason for this is, certainly, that the stylistic devices we have discerned in the quatrain are absent from the sequence of couplets. These devices further interact with some prosodic devices. The iambic and trochaic tetrameter have a very compelling, symmetrical shape. The symmetrical structure imputes an exceptionally obtrusive caesura after the fourth metrical position. The verbal structure may confirm this caesura, or may override it generating tension or blurring the division. In the present instance, two parallel prepositional phrases occupy both sides of the caesura, reinforcing the symmetrical division. This symmetrical and well-articulated arrangement is reinforced, as we have seen, by alliteration. Both the symmetry of the segments and the articulation of the caesura is further enhanced by an unoccupied weak position, after the third position. Consequently, the line is segmented into two exceptionally well-articulated short segments. In the ensuing couplets, by contrast, no unoccupied position occurs. Syntactically, the linguistic units at the two sides of the caesura do not parallel, but complement each other, yielding a relatively long perceptual unit. The phrase “Swifter than the moone’s sphere” further lengthens it.

What is more, in this line the caesura occurs in mid-phrase, after the article “the”, considerably blurring the symmetrical structure. According to the Gestalt laws of organisation presented at the beginning of this article, “The smaller a closed region, the more it tends to be seen as figure” (*pace* Stockwell’s assertion to the contrary, that one of the features that will, most likely, cause some part of a visual field or textual field to be seen as the figure is that “it will be [...] larger than the rest of the field that is then the ground” [15]). This may explain why the continuous lines of the couplets, as opposed to the symmetrically divided lines of the quatrain, are felt to relax rather than strengthen the focus of attention.

This passage has, nevertheless, one aspect of which Stockwell could make out a very convincing case, but he does not. The emphatically enumerated places might serve as the ground against which the fairy’s flight would be perceived as “swift”. The less penetrable the terrain, the more wondrous is the fairy’s swiftness. The shorter the phrases, the swifter is their alternation. However, he stops short of even quoting the line that indicates speed (he ends his quotation with the word “everywhere”). Apparently, his task is to label everything before OVER “trajector”; everything after it—“landmark”.

One might accuse me of being unfair to Stockwell, because he didn’t intend to exhaust the Shakespearian passage, merely illustrate the image schema. There may be many additional aspects that influence our final impression from the text, but the core meaning of the image schema is appropriately illustrated by this example. In a textbook the author must be brief. However, all the examples in Stockwell’s section “Figure and Ground” illustrate only this image schema; moreover, a look at the other examples of this section suggests that even those that can be discussed very briefly distort the focus of perception in a like fashion. The image schema OVER cannot be used as a diagnostic tool of Figure–Ground relationship.

In Stockwell’s “Cognitive Poetic Analysis” of a wide range of works Figure–Ground relationships boil down, eventually, to labeling expressions as “trajector” and “landmark”. I said above that he applies the terms figure–ground mechanically. “Dogmatically”, however, would be a more appropriate word. What moves “over” is automatically ruled “trajector”, what is under the wheels—automatically “landmark”. These labels are not verified against some sort of human response. The noun governed by “over” is “landmark”, therefore “ground”, and there’s an end on it. In the following quote, however, if one may judge from the title and syntactic structure, it is the dog who is in focus.

it gets run over by a van

(‘Your Dog Dies’, Raymond Carver)

“The trajector (van) crushes the landmark (your dog)” — says Stockwell. However, the fact that he became flat and motionless relative to the moving car and is under its wheels does not change the fact that the dog is in focus. Grammatically, too, it

doesn't say "a van ran over your dog", but chooses the passive voice, which manipulates the patient (your dog) into focus.³

Or consider the following quote from Shelley:

[click here to
insert last page](#)

Thine azure sister of the spring shall blow
Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth
(*'Ode to the West Wind'*, Percy Bysshe Shelley)

Again, "Trajector (from clarion blast) covers and pierces the landmark (earth)". However, the spring shall blow her clarion not merely "o'er the earth" as suggested by Stockwell, but "o'er the dreaming earth". Earth is not merely the place over which the clarion will be blown, but an agent in its own right, who is to be woken up by its sound.

After having rechristened Figure-Ground as "trajector" and "landmark, Stockwell goes on to talk about his examples in the latter terms, forgetting that he is supposed to talk about Figure-Ground relationship. But these terms, as we have seen, don't necessarily account for our perceptions of figure and ground in a poetic text.

I have quoted Leonard B. Meyer saying that unlike in visual perception, in music one may have figure without ground. I strongly suspect that this is the case in poetry too. But Stockwell, in these instances, "applies rules" rather than respond to poetic qualities. His "cognitive poetic analysis" of Ted Hughes's poem too rests on similar distinctions, but it would take a long discussion to demonstrate this.

By the way, revealing an "image schema" of dynamic movement in such prepositions as "over" is tautological in most instances. In most of the examples provided they are governed by such motion or action verbs as "wander", "ran over", "blow". The dynamic movement exposed in the preposition is already expressed by the verb. This is very different from Christine Brooke-Rose's handling of the genitive link between two nouns.

To conclude. Image schemata do not work wonders by themselves. One must, rather, adopt L. C. Knights's (1948: 229) position in a slightly different context: "But to say this is to admit that all the work remains to be done in each particular case".

³ Langacker (1990: 75) uses the terms "trajector" and "landmark" quite differently from Stockwell, much more in harmony with the conception presented here: "The choice of trajector is not mechanically determined by a predication's content, but is rather one dimension of conventional imagery. Indeed, the asymmetry is observable even for expressions that designate a symmetrical relationship. Thus X resembles Y and Y resembles X are not semantically equivalent; in the former, Y (the landmark) is taken as a standard of reference for evaluating X (the trajector); in the latter these roles are reversed". Compare this to "A van ran over your dog" and "Your dog gets run over by a van".

Figure–Ground Reversal in the “Moonlight” Sonata

This section is devoted to the problematic (or flexible) relationship of figure and ground in music. All through the opening movement of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” Sonata there is a series of obsessive rising sequences of three notes, as in music excerpt 4. In the course of writing this paper I compared a wide range of performances of Beethoven’s Sonata. Eventually I decided to quote here two of them, of unequal fame, by Alfred Brendel and Dubravka Tomasevich, a student of Rubinstein’s, because they illustrate most clearly the contrast which I want to bring out: that the performer has considerable control over presenting the triplets as ground or as figure.

Music Excerpt 4

Listen to Alfred Brendel’s performance of excerpt 4 (a), and Dubravka Tomasevich’s performance (b).

Brendel

Dubravka

a

b



Figure 7. The first two bars of the triplets in the Don Giovanni trio.

Marcia Green drew my attention to a remarkable similarity between this passage and a passage in *Don Giovanni*: in the short trio of the three basses, Don Giovanni, Leporello and the dying Commandatore (“Ah, soccorso! son tradito!”), the orchestra plays exactly the same kind of repeated rising series of three notes. Here, however, it is deeply buried in the “ground”, and even after repeated listenings I could only vaguely discern a dim um-pa-pa in the background, as in music excerpt 5.



Figure 8. The first four bars of the triplets in the Moonlight Sonata

Music Excerpt 5.

Listen to the Don Giovanni trio in Klemperer's recording (a). Listen to the triplets at the beginning of the same when the midrange is overemphasized (b). Listen to a piano extract of the triplets alone, played by Mira Gal (c).

DonGiovanni

a

DGEqu

b

PianoExtract

c

I will not quote here Green's interpretation of this similarity, with which I disagree. For me the most important part of the comparison is that Beethoven took a piece of ground music, that has a typical ground texture, and placed it in the focus of the sonata movement dominating for no less than six minutes the musical space. I had a long dialogue on this issue with Harai Golomb, professor of literary theory, theatre studies and musicology, who is certainly much more competent on music theory than myself, and I could not reach the ensuing conclusions without his insightful help. We both agree that Beethoven did not "imitate" the triplets from Mozart, and that this similarity does not indicate any significant relationship between them, either as composers or as persons (as Green would have us think). So, what is the point in pointing out the similarity besides the sheer piquancy of the comparison? Eventually I came to the conclusion that an analogy with intertextuality in literature may illuminate the issue. The juxtaposition of the two works foregrounds the different character of the two applications of the same technique. The similarity of Beethoven's triplets to Mozart's which in the Mondschein Sonata, in contrast to Don Giovanni, are in the focus of the listener's attention, foregrounds the difference between them. Golomb agrees that there is in the sonata a distinct, monotonous, repeatedly rising ta-ta-ta sequence. This sequence is exceptionally boring from the rhythmical point of view, resembling the typical "ground" texture in the Don Giovanni excerpt, and many other works. At the same time, the magic of the movement is due, he says, to tensions and resolutions in the harmonic structure of the whole, both in the sequence of triplets and the interplay of the various simultaneous melodic threads. There are three simultaneous threads in this movement, in, roughly speaking, the high range, the midrange and the low range. The afore-said triplets constitute the middle thread in this complex. There are the lower harmonic chords which, we both agree, generate a ground of tensions and resolutions, making a major contribution to the affective impact of the movement; and there is a higher sequence of longish notes which add up to a mildly rising and falling *melody*, which is the real figure of the movement. This melody, he says, though considerably diffuse, is more differentiated than the obstinately repeated ta-ta-ta series (as in excerpt 6). In my opinion, both the middle and the high threads are figure, although there is, from time to time, a "dialogue" between the highest and the lowest thread, skipping, as it were, the middle thread. Now one thing appears to be quite certain. That this dialogue does not turn the lowest thread into figure; it remains ground relative to the other two threads.

Music Excerpt 6

Listen to Alfred Brendel's performance of excerpt 6 (a), and Dubravka Tomashevich's performance (b).

Brendel2

a

Dubravka2

b

In harmony with my argument in the present paper, I assume here, too, that figure-ground relationships are not determined once for all in all circumstances. As we have seen, "what is figural at any one moment depends on patterns of sensory stimulation and on the momentary interests of the perceiver". My point is that in the case of a musical performance, "the momentary interests of the perceiver" can be manipulated to a considerable extent by the performer, by rather evasive cues: in different performances different threads of the "patterns of sensory stimulation" may be foregrounded, by mild shifts of attention to and fro, as, in the visual arts, in, e.g., the Escher drawings. My own view of the passage may have been influenced to a considerable extent by Alfred Brendel's performance on Philips 438 730-2. In this performance, the middle thread is somewhat louder relative to the other threads than in some other performances. As a result, the higher thread (as well as its dialogue with the lower thread, when perceived) is perceived as an *intrusion* into the "figure", the middle thread. This intrusion, in turn, will increase the sequence's tendency to reassert its integrity -- according to the gestalt assumption that a perceptual unit tends "to preserve its integrity by resisting interruptions". In this instance, the perception of figure-ground relationships can be further manipulated by the treatment of the longish notes of the highest thread. If their differentiation and connectedness into a melody is emphasized in the performance, they will attract attention as figure; if they are presented as more discrete notes, they will be perceived more as events intruding upon the rising sequences of three notes. My purpose here is not to offer a systematic comparative research of performances. What I want to emphasize is this: in Brendel's performance (more than in Tomashevich's), the high thread is perceived more as a series of intrusions than as a melodic line. This is due to two features of the performance. First, in 6a the second thread is louder relative to the other two threads than in 6b; and secondly, Brendel performs the higher thread in a peculiar way. Compare excerpt 6a to 6b. In the higher thread, we hear twice a group of tam-ta-tam on the same note, followed by a slightly higher one. Owing to amplitude dynamics and Brendel's "pianists' touch", this higher note is perceived as exerting a greater effort to intrude rather than as contributing to a continuous melodic line. The result is monotonous and exceptionally dramatic at the same time.

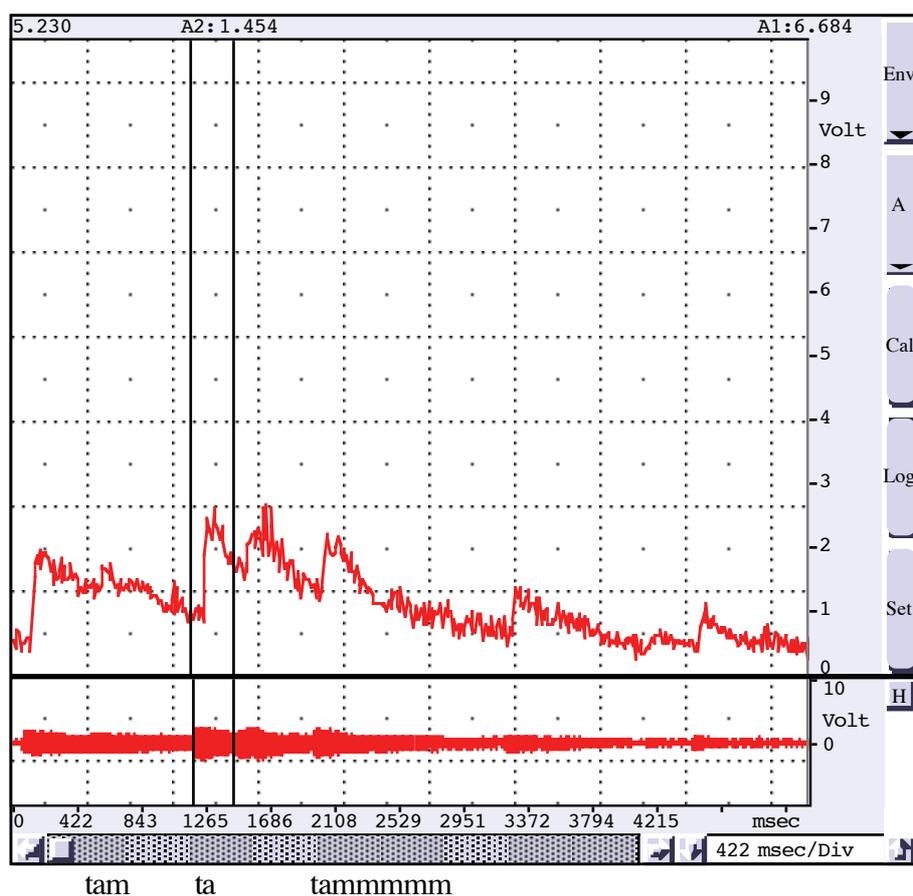


Figure 9. The envelope plot of music excerpt 6 in Brendel's performance

It is illuminating to consider the amplitude dynamics of the two performances in this excerpt. Figures 9-10 show the plot of amplitude envelope of the first tam-ta-tam group in the two performances. The three notes are of equal pitch. But, in Brendel's performance, each one of them begins with a distinct obtrusion of the amplitude envelope. In Tomashevich's performance, by contrast, the first two notes slightly fluctuate at a low level, and are followed by a third note of disproportionately great amplitude. Add to this that though both performances are "overdotted", the duration of the middle note in Tomashevich's performance is shorter: 273 msec, as opposed to Brendel's 296 msec. As a result, in Tomashevich's performance the first two notes are subordinated to the third one; the middle note is perceived more as a "passing note", leading forward to the third note. This tends to merge the three notes into one melodic line. In Brendel's performance, by contrast, the three notes are perceived as more discrete, have relatively greater perceptual

separateness. The middle note is perceived not only as a note in its own right, but also as more grouped with the preceding one. Translating Lerdahl and Jackendoff's transformational terminology into plain English, backward grouping generates tension, forward grouping -- relaxation.

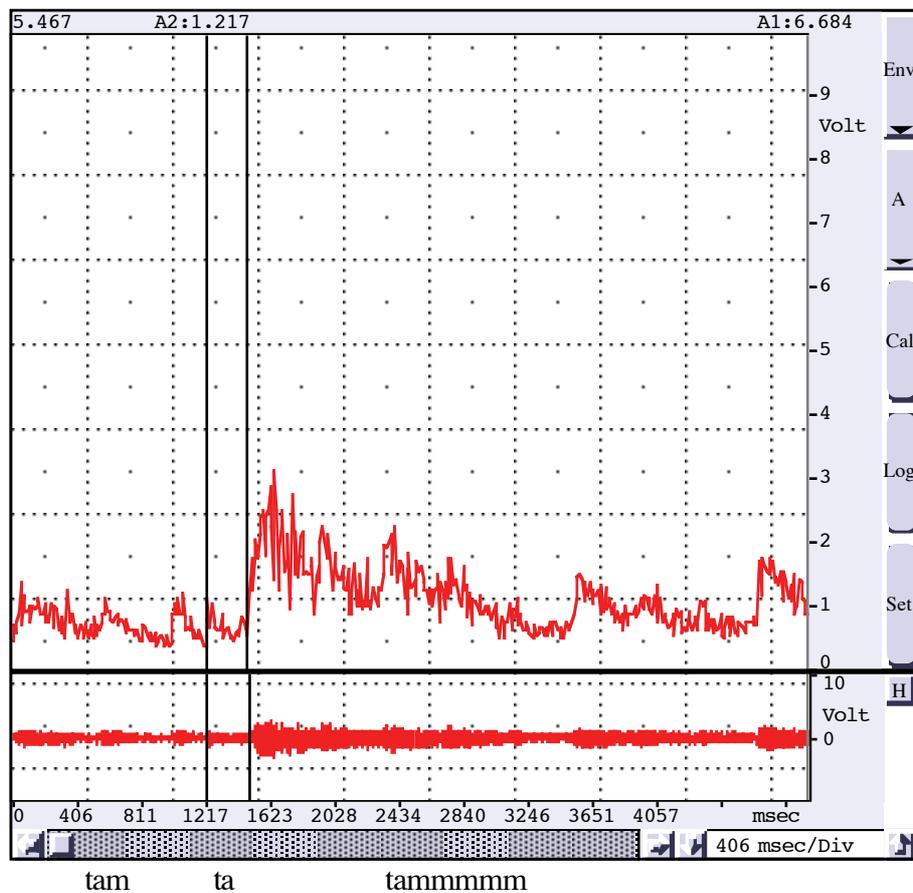


Figure 10. The envelope plot of music excerpt 6 in Tomashevich's performance

Julian Haylock, who wrote the music notes for the sonatas on Alfred Brendel's CD, suggested, quite impressionistically, what is the perceived effect of all this: "The opening *Adagio Sostenuto* [...] is quite unlike anything previously composed for the keyboard", and he speaks of "its dream-like texturing" which is, in this case, certainly, the artistic purpose of promoting a typical background texture to the status of a figure or, at least, of causing it to dominate a full-length sonata movement. According to Meyer, as we have seen, "the musical field can be perceived as containing a ground alone, as in the introduction to a musical work -- a song, for instance -- where the melody or figure is obviously still to come". It is the typical background

texture pushed into the foreground throughout a full movement that is “quite unlike anything previously composed for the keyboard”; and this is also the basis for “its dream-like texturing” -- reinforced by its interplay with the other two threads, as discussed above.

Figure–Ground Reversal in Literature

We have seen in Escher’s drawings that they grant the perceiver considerable freedom to foreground certain shapes as figure or relegate them to an undifferentiated background. Such an “aspect switching” requires only minimal mental effort. Escher discusses at some length what kinds of shapes allow such flexibility of perception. He does not discuss the means by which he tilts the perceiver’s inclination in one direction or the other. I have suggested that when the same closed area is repeated, lines or dots on it tend to bestow on it differentiation and induce us to perceive it as a figure; their absence, as ground. I have also suggested that the perceptual apparatus can easily overcome these “directive” means, by some conscious effort. Likewise, in Beethoven’s sonata we have seen that the performer may manipulate the listener’s perception of figure–ground relationships by connecting the notes of the higher thread into a perceptible melody, or leaving them as discontinuous, solitary events. Here the listener is more at the performer’s mercy, and “aspect switching” requires greater mental effort. In what follows, I will consider four literary texts that exploit this readiness of human perceivers to switch back and forth between figure and ground. All four texts achieve their effect by inducing readers to reverse figure–ground relationships relative to their habitual modes of thought or perception. As I insisted above, my examples do not concern this time figure–ground relationships generated by prosodic and syntactic structures as I have done elsewhere,⁴ but perceptions of, or attitudes toward, processes in extra-linguistic reality. Consider the following poem by Shelley:

A Song

A widow bird sate mourning for her love
Upon a wintry bough;
The frozen wind crept on above,
The freezing stream below.

There was no leaf upon the forest bare,
No flower upon the ground,

⁴ For instance: “An infringing stress obtrudes upon the integrity of the line which, in turn, strives to establish its shape in the reader’s perception. In run-on lines, deviant stresses may exert themselves more freely, may interact with other Gestalt-free elements, blend into a Gestalt-free ground, or even soften those features that would, otherwise, count toward strong shape” (Tsur, 1991: 245).

And little motion in the air
Except the mill-wheel's sound.

In aural perception, irregular noises (which constitute an overload on the cognitive system and most effectively violate the “Law of Good Continuation”) are usually dumped into the background. But when Shelley ends his “Song” with these two lines, he turns into figure a percept that most commonly is dumped into the ground. And this is enormously effective here. I have elsewhere discussed this poem at some length. Here I will reproduce only part of my discussion of the last two lines. They have a rather complex function within the whole. *Little* as a part of the sequence *There is no ... No... And little...* suggests “none at all”; in this sense, “And little motion in the air” is one more item in the list of analogous items suggesting **deprivation**. In this sense, it seems to herald an unqualified statement that generates a psychological atmosphere of great certainty. The subsequent preposition *except*, however, makes a substantial qualification to this statement, substituting “a very small amount of” for total exclusion; that is, there is an exclusion from the total exclusion: a mill-wheel’s sound. The relation of the *mill-wheel* to its sound is like the relation of a thing to a thing-free quality. What seems to be emphasised by this is that only the thing-free quality, but not the thing itself is introduced into the description. This perturbation of the air becomes another item in the list of items with reduced activity; by the same token, it foregrounds the presence of the air, *the* thing-free entity *par excellence* pervading the scene. This shift of the meaning, qualifying the unqualified statement, performs a “poetic sabotage” against the determined, purposeful quality of the poetic closure, replacing the psychological atmosphere of great certainty with a psychological atmosphere of *uncertainty*, contributing to the emotional quality of the poem. This emotional atmosphere has been generated by the abstraction of certain qualities from parallel concrete items in the description. Both the emotional quality and the “poetic sabotage” of closure are reinforced by another aspect of the mill-wheel’s sound, which I wish to point out through an idea borrowed from Joseph Glicksohn. As I suggested above, the cognitive system handles irregular noises constituting perceptual overload by dumping them into the ground. Thus, the mill-wheel’s sound—consisting of irregular noises—typically serves as ground to some aural figure. By forcing to the reader’s attention a percept that typically serves as ground, the poem increases the emotional quality of the perception, and emphasises that *there is no* figure to be contemplated, reinforcing the quality of deprivation. Thus, the poem ends with “a ground alone, as in the introduction to a musical work [...] where the melody or figure is obviously still to come”. When it occurs at the end of a work, its lack of progress does not prepare for some thing to come as in the introduction to a musical work, but suggests some disintegration: the poem does not *end*, it passes out of existence, fades away.

The next two examples can be regarded as displaying different degrees of one kind. Consider the following Sonnet by Sir Philip Sidney:

Leave me, O love which reachest but to dust;
And thou, my mind, aspire to higher things;
Grow rich in that which never taketh rust,
Whatever fades but fading pleasure brings.
Draw in thy beams, and humble all thy might
To that sweet yoke where lasting freedoms be;
Which breaks the clouds and opens forth the light,
That doth both shine and give us sight to see.
O take fast hold; let that light be thy guide
In this small course which birth draws out to death,
And think how evil becometh him to slide,
Who seeketh heaven, and comes of heavenly breath.
Then farewell, world; thy uttermost I see;
Eternal Love, maintain thy life in me.

I have elsewhere discussed the light imagery of this sonnet at considerable length (Tsur, 1998; 2003: 320–328). Now I will devote attention to the third quatrain.

Let us work out the internal logic of this image, in terms of mental habits and their manipulation by literary means. I will argue that the central device of this passage is a reversal of figure–ground relationship. But before discussing that, I wish to examine this passage in light of what Kenneth Burke calls “Scene-Act Ratio” and “Scene-Agent Ratio”. In these Ratios “Scene” typically serves as ground to “Act” and “Agent”, which are, typically, the figure. Burke proposed to analyse human motives and actions in terms of the “dramatic pentade”: Act, Scene, Agency, Agent, Purpose.

Using “scene” in the sense of setting, or background, and “act” in the sense of action, one could say that “the scene contains the act.” And using “agents” in the sense of actors, or acters, one could say that “the scene contains the agents.”

And whereas comic and grotesque works may deliberately set these elements at odds with one another, audiences make allowance for such liberty, which reaffirms the same principle of consistency in its very violation. [...] In any case, examining first the relation between scene and act, all we need note here is the principle whereby the scene is a fit “container” for the act, expressing in fixed properties the same quality that the action expresses in terms of development (Burke, 1962: 3).

In the case of Sidney’s poem, the scene and the act define the nature of the agent as well as his purpose: the Soul *comes from* heavenly breath and *goes to* (seeketh) heaven; according to Burke, this is a way to say in spatial and temporal terms that the Soul is (in the present) of a heavenly essence (“temporization of the essence”). George Lakoff and his followers would speak here of the event structure metaphor

“PURPOSEFUL ACTION IS A JOURNEY”; the purpose of the action is expressed, very much in Burke’s spirit, by the place to which the journey leads. A more specific instantiation of this metaphor is “LIFE IS A JOURNEY”.⁵

Now consider this: in this poem, the purpose of the journey is presented by two different *ends*: “Who seeketh heaven, and comes of heavenly breath”, and “In this small course which birth draws out to death”. These two destinations have opposite implications. One presents “Life as full of meaning”; the other presents “Life as totally meaningless”. There is all the difference if “this small course” leads to the grave or to heaven.

Particular occasions of birth and death in everyday life are perceived as figures, and life only as ground, at best. But when we speak of Human Life, *Life* becomes the figure, only marked at its extremes by birth and death, which thus become ground. In Christian religious traditions *Life* is only a transient episode for the soul which “seeketh heaven, and comes of heavenly breath”. Religious rhetoric frequently attempts to bring man to an *insight* into this truth by using paradoxical epigrammatic phrasings (such as “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it” -- Mark 8.35). Religious poetry may attempt to do this by a sudden shift of attention from the habitual *figure* to its *ground*, the markers of its extremes: Sidney gently manipulates attention from “this small course” to “birth” and “death”, which are only meant to mark the extremes of life.⁶

Now notice this. Purpose is not absent from the image

let that light be thy guide

In this small course which birth draws out to death,

it is only translated into a different visual terminology. In my paper on the cognitive structure of light imagery in religious poetry I discussed this poem at great length. I pointed out a wide range of meaning potentials in the light image, many of which are exploited in this poem. *One* of them is related to Lakoff’s conceptual metaphor “KNOWING IS SEEING”: Light gives instructions, shows the way. Another one is derived from the fact that the Light comes from an invisible and inaccessible source in the sky. Thus, these two lines do not express life’s purpose by a place that serves as

⁵ It is quite characteristic of the present critical vogue that referees of my papers frequently suggest that in some place or other I might mention Lakoff’s work; but so far they have never suggested Burke.

⁶ The changing relationship between shapes and their edges as figure-ground relationship is well brought out by the following two locutions concerning geographic configurations: with reference to the US, the phrases “Western Coast” and “Eastern Coast” foreground the dry land between them as figure, the water being part of the ground; with reference to the Middle East, the phrases “Eastern Bank” and “Western Bank” foreground the water between them as figure, the dry land being part of the ground. For political reasons, the dry land of “The Western Bank” has now become figure in its own right.

the destination of the journey; but this purpose is reintroduced by another conventional metaphor: light as knowing, understanding, or proper guidance.

The same figure–ground reversal is brought to an absurd extreme in the following quotation from Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*:

Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps.

The tramp Vladimir sharpens Sidney’s inverted image to absurdity: Man passes straight from the womb to the tomb, assisted by the gravedigger’s forceps. In a world in which “God is dead”, there is nothing beyond, and what is in between is meaningless and negligible. The emotional disorientation aroused by this understanding is reinforced by the grotesque image, the typical effect of the grotesque being, as pointed out by Thomson (1972), “emotional disorientation”. In our everyday perception, birth is the beginning of life; death its cessation. What matters is life itself. Both in Sidney’s and Beckett’s image the two extremes, birth and death, or the womb and the grave become the figure; what is between them (life!) serves only to connect them. And the shorter the connection, the more meaningless life becomes.

A most interesting instance of figure–ground reversal is provided by the great Hebrew poet, Nathan Alterman, in his poem “I will yet come to your threshold with extinguished lips”. In this poem the speaker expresses his hope that he will yet reach his beloved, in a state of exhaustion, though. The poem ends with the only thing he can still offer her:

The silence in the heart between two beats—
This silence
Is yours.

This is a variation on the age-old poetic convention “My true love has my heart and I have his”, in which “heart” stands for AFFECTION, LOVE. It is also a metonymy for LIFE. Love, life, affection dwell in the heart; the heart, in turn, is enclosed in the body. Heartbeats are minute, barely perceptible events; whereas the silence between the beats is even less perceptible. We are faced with the *innermost* emotional experiences. Consider the Scene–Act ratio *innermost–intimate*. They are intimately related: the latter is derived from Latin *intimus* =innermost, superlative of (assumed) Old Latin *interus*. The Microsoft Word Thesaurus gives, among others, the following partial synonyms for *intimate*: “dear, inner, deep”. Alterman’s metaphor suggests something that is most minute and insignificant, but, at the same time, involves the innermost, most precious, deepest, most intimate feelings of the heart.

We are not aware that our heartbeats occur against a ground of silence; that we could not perceive beats if there were no periods of silence between them. The figure–ground reversal of Alterman’s metaphor, relegating the beats to the ground, brings this to awareness. This generates conflicting emotional tendencies: a *witty*

reversal foregrounding a *desperate* gesture. The reversal exposes the perceiving consciousness to an absence, a thing-free quality, instead of positive focused events to which the imagination can hold on. Typically, such lack of hold inspires the perceiver with awe and uncertainty; here this is overridden by the psychological atmosphere of certainty generated by the “ultimate” connotations characterised above as “innermost, most precious, deepest, most intimate”, generating both an intense emotional quality and a powerful closure.

Summary and Wider Perspectives

Figure–ground relationship is an important notion of gestalt theory. Theorists of the psychology of music and the visual arts made most significant use of it. The significance of this notion in literary theory is rather limited. The most important attempt to import this distinction to linguistics and literary theory is William Labov’s. Unfortunately, some linguists and literary critics regard Labov’s work as a model for technical exercises rather than a source of insights into some significant part-whole relationship. Peter Stockwell does realise the Gestalt origins of these notions; but the way he applies them to particular poems is unsatisfactory. This paper made the point that such grammatical terms as “agent” or “instrument” or such cognitive terms as “trajector” and “landmark” are not foolproof diagnostic tools. Rather, figure–ground relationship is an important element of the way we organise reality in our awareness, including works of art. In my dealing with poetry I have focussed attention on figure–ground relationships in extralinguistic reality; only in the *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* quotation I referred to the interaction between prosodic and syntactic structures, as I had done in my earlier work too. I argued that poets may rely on our habitual figure–ground organisations in extra-linguistic reality, and exploit our flexibility in shifting attention from one aspect to another so as to achieve certain poetic effects by inducing us to reverse the habitual figure–ground relationships. This flexibility has precedent in music and the visual arts. I have examined four examples from four literary masterpieces. An important concomitant of these close readings was to demonstrate that in most instances one may not only identify these reversals in the text, but may also suggest their effects. In Sidney’s poem and the excerpt from Beckett the resulting “message” could be paraphrased in a straightforward conceptual language. But this is quite misleading. What is important here is not so much the “message” conveyed, but the insight resulting from the shift of mental sets. In Shelley’s poem, the conceptual “message” diminishes to a minimum, and the main effect of the reversal is an intense perceptual quality that can only be approximated by such descriptive terms as “uncertainty, purposelessness, dissolution, wasting away”.

This may lead us to some wider stylistic perspectives. According to Ehrenzweig (1965), the irregular or endlessly-repeated “scribblings” that typically constitute ground both in visual and aural perception are perceived subliminally, but render the figure fuller, more plastic. A good wallpaper in a room, he says, goes unnoticed; but it makes all the difference. Labov treats ground as a means for evaluating experience

in story-telling. In the “Moonlight” Sonata it is the ground that gives the enormous dramatic accentuation to the endlessly-repeated rising triplets and the higher sequences of three notes of equal pitch. The present paper has been devoted to instances of aural, visual and verbal art in which the normal figure–ground relationship is defamiliarised or even reversed.

In Western art and poetry there is a “witty” as well as a “high-serious”, emotional tradition. Figure–ground manipulation, too, may have an emotional or witty effect. The examples from Escher, Sidney and Beckett may be considered as artistic devices generating a witty quality of some degree or other. In extreme cases the witty turn may cause a shock experienced as emotional disorientation. In Romantic poetry and music, by contrast, when exposed to ground texture usurping the place of figures, readers and listeners may detect some structural resemblance between such texture and emotional processes, experiencing it as an emotional quality.⁷ This is what happens, I suggest, at the end of Shelley’s “Song”, and more forcefully, in the first movement of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” Sonata. In Alterman’s poem, I suggested, both a witty and an emotional quality may be perceived; the reader may, perhaps, perceive these two aspects simultaneously, or even switch between them at will.

One of the major functions of poetry is to yield heightened awareness. It may be the heightening of the awareness of the reality perceived, or of the cognitive mechanisms that enable us to perceive reality. The self-examination of cognitive mechanisms is still an investigation of reality; the investigation has merely lost its directness (cf. Pears, 1971: 31). Escher’s experimentation with figure and ground, for instance, yields an heightened awareness of our perceptual mechanisms.

Instances of figure–ground reversal, especially those that arouse emotional disorientation, may have an effect similar to mystic paradoxes. So, Steven T. Katz’s words on mystic paradoxes may apply to some instances of figure–ground reversal too. “Such linguistic ploys exist in many places throughout the world, usually connected with the conscious construction of paradoxes whose necessary violation of the laws of logic are intended to shock, even shatter, the standard epistemic security of ‘disciples,’ thereby allowing them to move to new and higher forms of insight/knowledge. That is [...], [the mystics] intend, among other things, to force the hearers of such propositions to consider who they are—to locate themselves vis-a-vis normal versus transcendental ‘reality’” (1992: 7–8, cf. Tsur 2003: 207–208). This is the conspicuous purpose of the figure–ground reversal in Sidney’s poem, though considerably mitigated by its conventionality. The same device in Beckett’s play is

⁷ Ehrenzweig claims that students of the great masters of painting or the violin *can* imitate the visual or melodic figures they produce; it is their irregular, gestalt-free, subliminally perceived brush strokes or vibrati and glissandi “sandwiched” between the tones that they find hard to imitate. It is these irregular “scribblings”, he says, that convey the unconscious contents of art. Ehrenzweig, however, does not tell us how these scribblings convey unconscious contents. So, I prefer to fall back on his notions of gestalt-free and thing-free qualities in which, I suggest, viewers and listeners may detect some structural resemblance to emotions.

intended to shock, even shatter, the standard epistemic security of the audience so as, by contrast, to make it painfully aware of the meaninglessness of the *Condition Humaine*. In the religious poem, disorientation is followed by reorientation; in the theatre of the absurd, by contrast, the basic assumption is that “God is dead”, and there is no “transcendental ‘reality’”.

References

- Arnheim, Rudolf (1957) *Art and Visual Perception*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Brooke-Rose, Christine (1958) *A Grammar of Metaphor*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Burke, Kenneth (1962) *A Grammar of Motives* and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (in one volume). Cleveland & New York: Meridian Books.
- Cooper, C. W. and L. B. Meyer (1960) *The Rhythmic Structure of Music*. Chicago: Chicago UP.
- Ehrenzweig, Anton (1965) *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing*. New York: Braziller.
- Ehrenzweig, Anton (1970) *The Hidden Order of Art*. London: Paladin.
- Escher, M.C. (1992) “The Regular Division of the Plain”, in J.L. Locher (ed.), *M.C. Escher -- His Life and Complete Graphic Work*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. Publishers. 155-172.
- Freeman, Margaret H. (2000) “Poetry and the scope of metaphor: Toward a cognitive theory of literature”. In *Metaphor & Metonymy at the Crossroads*. Ed. Antonio Barcelona. 253–281. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1970) “Language Structure and Language Function”, in John Lyons (ed.), *New Horizons in Linguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 140-165).
- Herrnstein-Smith, Barbara (1968) *Poetic Closure*. Chicago: Chicago UP.
- Hochberg, Julian E. (1964) *Perception*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Katz, Steven T. (1992) “Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning” in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Language*. New York: Oxford UP. 3-41.
- Knights, L.C. 1964 [1928¹] “Notes on Comedy”. In E. Bentley (ed), *The Importance of Scrutiny*. New York: New York UP. 227-237.
- Labov, William (1972) *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lakoff, George (1993) “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor”, in Andrew Ortony (ed.,) *Thought and Metaphor*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP (second ed.). 202-251.
- Langacker, Ronald (1990) *Concept, Image and Symbol*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Lerdahl, Fred and Ray Jackendoff (1983) *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT P.
- Meyer, Leonard B. (1956) *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Chicago: Chicago UP.

- Oras, Ants (1957) "Spenser and Milton: Some Parallels and Contrasts in the Handling of Sound", in Northrop Frye (ed.), *Sound and Poetry*. New York: English Institute Essays. 109-133.
- Pears, David (1971) *Wittgenstein*. London: Fontana.
- Stockwell, Peter (2002) *Cognitive Poetics—An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Thomson, Philip (1972) *The Grotesque*. London: Methuen.
- Tsur, Reuven (1977) *A Perception-Oriented Theory of Metre*. Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics. 244 pp.
- Tsur, Reuven (1992) *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics*. Amsterdam: Elsevier (North Holland) Science Publishers. 580 pp.
- Tsur, Reuven (1998) "Light, Fire, Prison: A Cognitive Analysis of Religious Imagery in Poetry." *PSYART: A Hyperlink Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts*, article 980715. Available HTTP: <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipso/journal/articles/tsur02.htm>. See now also Tsur, 2003: 317-348.
- Tsur, Reuven (1998) *Poetic Rhythm: Structure and Performance -- An Empirical Study in Cognitive Poetics* (in English). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Tsur, Reuven (2003) *On The Shore of Nothingness: Space, Rhythm, and Semantic Structure in Religious Poetry and its Mystic-Secular Counterpart—A Study in Cognitive Poetics*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Tsur, Reuven (2006) "Kubla Khan"—*Poetic Structure, Hypnotic Quality and Cognitive Style: A Study in Mental, Vocal, and Critical Performance*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Tsur, R., Glicksohn, J., & Goodblatt, C. (1990) "Perceptual Organization, Absorption and Aesthetic Qualities of Poetry". László Halász (ed.), *Proceedings of the 11th International Congress on Empirical Aesthetics*. Budapest: Institute for Psychology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. 301-304.
- Tsur, R., Glicksohn, J., & Goodblatt, C. (1991) "Gestalt Qualities in Poetry and the Reader's Absorption Style". *Journal of Pragmatics* 16 (5): 487-504.

insert text

Back

A sympathetic reader made the following critical point concerning my analysis of “it gets run over by a van”: “The discussion of Trajector-Landmark configurations apart (i.e. Stockwell’s vs. Langackers’s options), in functional linguistics the principle of end-weight, or end-focus, is a well-established one. As such, ‘by a van’ receives maximal attention in terms of new information and emphasis. It (the dog/trajector) remains as given information. In the active voice (a van ran over your dog) it is the dog which is in focus, not the van. The van remains as backgrounded, given information”. This comment forced me to refine my argument, with reference to M.A.K. Halliday’s (1970) following distinction: “Given and new thus differ from theme and rheme, though both are textual functions, in that ‘given’ means ‘here is a point of contact with what you know’ (and thus is not tied to elements in clause structure), whereas ‘theme’ means ‘here is the heading to what I am saying’“ (p. 163); he calls the latter “psychological subject”. In this description, then, “it (your dog)” is the “psychological subject”, the “theme” (as opposed to “rheme”), the “heading to what the speaker is saying”. If the figure-ground distinction is relevant at all to this line, then “figure” must be identified with the “psychological subject”, the “theme”, “the heading to what the speaker is saying” rather than with either the “given” or “new” information. In other words, in “it gets run over by a van” the all-important fact conveyed is that my dog is killed. The passive voice serves to highlight this all-important fact by manipulating it into the theme and relegating the instrument into the rheme. The new information, “by a van”, fills in a hitherto unknown, relatively unimportant detail.

Back