

# RECONSTRUCTING READING: RESURRECTING COGNITIVE PROCESSES IN THE (FOREIGN) LANGUAGE CLASSROOM<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper departs from Michael Polanyi's assertion that "we always know more than we can say" (*Personal Knowledge, The Tacit Dimension*). It discusses classroom strategies and student as well as teacher observations about teaching reading comprehension by unpacking the cognitive psychological processes that allow students to discover *how* they know what they know and how they use this knowledge to discover implicit meaning in what they read. This is of particular interest since so many university students now have a relatively poor preparation in reading, both in native language vocabulary and in analysis of structures.

The data come from an undergraduate class introducing French literature texts to non-native speakers and includes citations in French (with translations in English) from the texts studied. It also includes journal entries from students during the course of their exposure to both the texts and the theory of "dead" or generic-level metaphors (George Lakoff and Mark Turner, 1989; Mark Johnson; 1980, 1987; and Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Conclusions about how the examination of the implicit, or tacit, dimension of knowing enriches both the reading process and provides a way of reconstructing the reader's world, rather than leaving it in the dissatisfaction of deconstructed suspension, suggest useful and needed ways of approaching the teaching of reading in either foreign or native language classrooms.

## KEY WORDS

Cliché, commonplace, dead metaphor, embodied perception, Gestalt, Reading, reconstructive postcritical philosophy, skill, tacit knowing.

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## RESUMEN

Este ensayo está basado en la afirmación de Michael Polyani que nosotros siempre sabemos más que podemos expresar/decir (*Personal Knowledge, The Tacit Dimension*). Presenta las estrategias utilizadas en la clase, incluso las observaciones de los estudiantes y del profesor sobre la enseñanza de la comprensión de lectura por medio de los procesos psicológicos (los cuales les permiten a los estudiantes descubrir por qué y como ellos saben lo que saben y de que manera utilizan estos conocimientos para entender la esencia/el sentido de lo que leen. Es de interés particular, puesto que a menudo los estudiantes universitarios les faltan la preparación adecuada de leer textos literarios, tanto en la lengua materna como en el análisis de la estructura lingüística.

Las conclusiones surgen de una clase para estudiantes subgraduados del primer año universitario. Fue una introducción de textos literarios franceses para los estudiantes no francófonos e incluía citas en francés (con traducciones al inglés) de los textos estudiados. También incluye entradas de los diarios mantenidos por los estudiantes durante el curso, con comentarios sobre la práctica de la teoría de “metáforas muertas” o metáforas al nivel genérico (George Lakoff and Mark Turner, 1989; Mark Johnson 1980, 1987; and Lakoff and Johnson, 1999).

Las conclusiones muestran que la dimensión de lo implícito, o de lo tácito, enriquece el proceso de leer y también plantea una manera de reconstruir el mundo del lector, en vez de dejarlo suspendido y oscuro. Sugiere medios útiles y necesarios de acercar/presentar la enseñanza de lectura tanto en lenguas extranjeras como en la lengua maternal.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Cliché, tópico, lugar común, metáfora muerta, percepción incorporada (encarnada), Gestalt, lectura, filosofía postcrítica reconstructiva, habilidad, saber/conocimiento tácito.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet essai est basé sur l'assertion de Michael Polyani que “nous savons toujours plus que ce que l'on peut dire/exprimer” (*Personal Knowledge, The Tacit Dimension*). Il décrit les stratégies utilisées dans la salle de classe, les observations des étudiants et du professeur concernant l'enseignement de la compréhension de lecture, tout en dévoilant les processus psychologiques qui permettent aux étudiants de découvrir *pourquoi et comment* ils savent ce qu'ils savent et de quelle manière ils utilisent cette connaissance pour trouver le sens de ce qu'ils lisent. C'est particulièrement intéressant puisque beaucoup d'étudiants universitaires ont une préparation à la lecture très pauvre marquée par un manque de vocabulaire dans leur langue maternelle ou dans l'analyse des structures narratives.

Ces données viennent d'une classe d'étudiants du premier cycle, exposant des étudiants non francophones à des textes de littérature française et com-

prennent des citations en français (avec la traduction anglaise) des textes étudiés. Les données comprennent également des extraits de journaux des étudiants exposés aux textes et à la théorie des métaphores “mortes” de niveau générique (George Lakoff et Mark Turner, 1989; Mark Johnson, 1980, 1987; et Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Les conclusions montent comment l’observation de cette dimension, implicite ou tacite, du savoir enrichit non seulement le processus de lecture mais fournit également un moyen de reconstruire le monde du lecteur (plutôt que de le laisser dans l’insatisfaction d’une suspension détruite), elles suggèrent des moyens utiles et nécessaires d’approcher/de présenter l’enseignement de la lecture dans les langues, étrangères ou maternelles.

#### MOTS-CLÉ

Cliché, lieu commun, métaphore morte, perception incorporée (incarnée), Gestalt, lecture, philosophie postcritique reconstructive, adresse, compétence, savoir/connaissance tacite.

“We always know more than we can say”. This assertion is at the heart of Michael Polanyi’s “reconstructive” post-critical philosophy (Gill; Polanyi *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*; Polanyi *The Tacit Dimension*) a way of understanding the world that has the appealing quality of being clear and simple, as well as offering a way of getting on with reading after some of the consuming diversions of deconstruction. It takes as its central axis the Gestalt principle that shows us how we understand a figure against its (back)ground, deriving meaning in the former without necessarily attending to the latter’s presence.

Both teachers and students can benefit from an intuitive, cognitive psychological, discourse analysis that unpacks the generic-level or “dead” metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson), the “ground” we use unconsciously, which makes language and literature possible. This paper offers preliminary anecdotal evidence from a classroom experiment in teaching methodology<sup>2</sup>. It suggests how an approach to texts that uncovers and elaborates the so-called “dead” metaphors (clichés, stereotypes, and commonplaces) often assumed to be understood by every-

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<sup>2</sup> This experiment took place with undergraduate university students but could easily (and perhaps should) be applied more appropriately to secondary or even elementary level students where the gap between the still concrete and the precociously abstract first appears and then widens, sometimes beyond closing. There were no literature majors and no French majors in the class, but all students had a good intermediate command of the language.

one (and perhaps even more often ignored as too obvious to warrant discussion) effectively initiates and enriches the reading process in the (foreign) language classroom. This teaching methodology helps students, whose preparation in reading is, relatively speaking, poorer than in the past, to bring into consciousness what they already know, and to use this implicit knowing to read literature, not to mention the world around them. Retrieving the background is an important skill, a skill that fosters the kind of elastic and adaptable reflection we think of as the mark of thoughtful and useful citizens. This “textual awareness” (McRae, p. 20) that is essential to perceptive reading and thinking can be made available to just about everyone, but most students (and not a few teachers) remain unaware of, or unable to explain, the cognitive discourse strategies that we all use automatically, whether or not we have any training in philosophy, psychology, literary criticism or linguistic theory.

In the following pages, the description of the first half of a course<sup>3</sup> introducing a variety of French literary texts to non-native speakers at the intermediate level, demonstrates some of the cognitive processes required to understand the relatively simple texts presented. The student journal entries show how they responded both to the unpacking of the processes they already use, and to their application of this new awareness to more difficult texts.

On the first day of this class I went over the elements of a metaphor, the tenor and vehicle, and the “blended space” (Fauconnier) made up of the mix, which creates the metaphor itself, the “space” of understanding. I used the metaphor, *READING IS A JOURNEY* to show them that they already “knew” the “dead” metaphor/cliché, *LIFE IS A JOURNEY*. Enlarging on the travel theme, I also used the simile, “reading is like learning to drive a stick-shift” to suggest that reading is a process that takes time, practice, and attention to learn to do it well. Steering and braking are not too difficult, but putting in the clutch, finding first gear, letting off the brake while gently accelerating, not to mention learning

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<sup>3</sup> After trying this method out informally (in a grammar class and in an intermediate conversation class) to decode vocabulary by finding the metaphors through the literal meanings and then proceeding, via the imagination to discover the figurative meaning, I designed it into the initial phase of the introductory readings course. Admittedly, I do not have an experimental control group, but other Teaching Assistants and professors have taught this course using the same textbook and found their students were often unable to get passed a one-dimensional reading, in spite of excellent model questions provided before and after the texts.

when to shift up or down by listening to the engine and by noticing what is happening on the road itself, all require a false start or a stalled engine from time to time, but they become automatic with practice. Familiarity comes with the repetition that allows the driver to “indwell” or inhabit the act of driving, and reading has all the same properties. Reading is a skill acquired by lived practice, and language is its only habitat.

I also introduced a number of other figures of rhetoric (metonymy, synecdoche, personification, antithesis, periphrase –as different from paraphrase, circumlocution), used for making comparisons. There were students who had heard of a few of these terms, but none had heard of them all, and few could give a definition or an example of even the most familiar on the first day. Indeed, among the first to try to explain what a metaphor was had it confused with a simile. By the second day, however, things had improved; a number of them had used the dictionary before coming to class.

We continued by noting the commonplaces in two fables by Jean de La Fontaine<sup>4</sup>. Everyone understood the first fable, “La cigale et la fourmi” (“The Locust /Grasshopper and the Ant”), a few of them recognized it, but none of them “knew” the “dead” metaphor, PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS, or could name it as a commonplace; indeed, initially none of them could say why they understood the fable’s morale; they “just did”. Within a moment of drawing their attention back to the READING/LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, however, a few of them were able to articulate the PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS metaphor. For the second day, they had prepared the fable, “Le chêne et le roseau” (“The Oak and the Reed”), and they came into class ready to talk about the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor, which they were able to support with the examples of synecdoche found in the text: “mon front” (“my forehead”), “le pied” (the foot”).

In the student journals most of them said they knew that animals and plants are often used as allegories for people in (especially children’s) literature. Some of them made a connection from the fables to their own lives. Two students associated them with Eastern philosophies, the Tao Te Ching and Buddhism, and several noted that they felt less inclined to admire the ant and condemn the cicada (locust/grasshopper) than they had been. One student, a second year engineering major, commented,

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<sup>4</sup> “La Cigale et la fourmi” (“The Locust /Grasshopper and the Ant”), “Le chêne et le roseau” (“The Oak and the Reed”).

– I found the lesson [...] particularly enlightening. I had never been exposed to the idea of a ‘dead metaphor’ and I must admit, at first I found the whole idea to be somewhat simplistic or overly obvious. However, as we continued with the lesson, I found it very interesting that we were analyzing literature based on facts that were already known to each of us on some intrinsic kind of level. [...] It allows me to feel that I am just as capable as anyone else to figure out just what the author is attempting to convey with his story.

On the third day we looked at another kind of text altogether, a “fait divers” or newspaper clipping, about a minor incident taken from *Le Monde* in 1979. The article, entitled “Victoire des femmes au Fouquet’s” (“Women’s Victory at Fouquet’s”) (Hage, Steele and Verdaguer), related how two women doctors went into a bistro on the Champs Élysées whose interior bar was traditionally restricted to men. Walking past a faded sign indicating that unaccompanied women would not be served at the bar, an effort to keep out prostitutes, the doctors insisted on being served and reported their experience to the newspaper, which in turn sent two more women to the bar a few days later to test the policy and document the events. Several customers, who were interviewed by the journalist, complained about the fuss, and the bar changed its policy in order to avoid any further media coverage.

All the students seemed to understand the text, and one was able to identify the language of the other customers who were interviewed as referring to women as objects, but, in fact, they did not see the texts’ multiple dimensions. I pointed out that a subject is someone who is active, whose movement is unrestricted, and who “sees” others, whereas an object is someone who is immobile and who is seen by others. At this point, I explained several important “dead” metaphors that allow the reader to “know this”: INCLUSION IS GOOD/EXCLUSION IS BAD, MOVEMENT IS POWER/IMMOBILITY IS WEAKNESS, and SEEING IS KNOWING (OR UNDERSTANDING)/BEING SEEN IS BEING KNOWN. To do this I drew a circle on the board representing the bar and asked them who was inside and who was outside, as well as who was looking at whom. We talked about the bistro with its separate, interior, private bar where women could not go unescorted as a closed space, a space to which access was restricted to those who “belonged”<sup>5</sup>. After some discussion about the social status of the doc-

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<sup>5</sup> I mentioned as an aside the configuration of European cities in which the rich live in the center and the poor in the suburbs, in contrast to many American urban areas.

tors as opposed to possible prostitutes, and the importance of *who* is judging women's appearance, the students then reasoned, in response to a question posed by the textbook about why the bar decided to abandon its policy, that the *Direction* (owners of the bar) did not want to *be seen*, did not want to become the *objects* of media scrutiny. The student journals brought the following sample of comments in response to this text:

– I can honestly say that I did not see the “inclusion/exclusion” of this text when I first read it. After you mentioned it to the class, it made so much sense to me. I could not believe that I had not noticed this aspect of the text. It really made me see the text in a different way. What I first saw as a simple newspaper article was so complex. Every character had a role in the “inclusion/exclusion” metaphor. [...] Not only did the article deal with feminist issues of “in/out”, “inclusion/exclusion on the surface, but it was so well integrated in the text with the interviewees’ and reporter’s comments. Class discussion of this article REALLY helped my understanding of it (Capitals in the original).

– It would be easy for someone to ask why the women cared so much about going into a bar. But their motivation lies in two of the clichés we discussed: ‘Being included is a good thing’ and ‘Mobility is power’. The protest wasn’t about going to a bar, it was about having the power [to go to a bar] and being included in society. The third idea we discussed, “seeing is knowing”, is particularly relevant to my life right now and so I’ve thought about it a lot this week. Meeting so many new people, it’s hard to control my impressions of them and not make judgments when I don’t really even know them. It’s also frustrating to know that people are doing the same thing to me because I don’t want to be judged by my appearance or superficial actions.

Clearly, before our discussions, students were not thinking about these commonplace understandings as they approached the texts, and they were not yet ready to pick them out in reading the texts. Returning to the texts, however, thinking about the inherent dead metaphors enriched their understanding not only of the texts but of themselves.

On the fourth day we took up a short poem by Robert Desnos called “Le Pélican” (The Pelican). The poem is a sonnet of three stanzas of four lines and eight counts each followed by a couplet of ten counts in each verse. All the verses, however, end in the same rhyme, a rhyme also found in the interior of the poem:

Le capitaine Jonathon/ Etant âgé de dix-huit ans,/ Capture un jour un  
pélican/ Dans une île d’Extrême-Orient. // Le pélican de Jonathon,/ Au  
matin, pond un œuf tout blanc/ Et il sort un pélican/ Lui ressemblant

étonnamment. // Et ce deuxième pélican/ Pond, à son tour, un œuf tout blanc/ D'où sort, inévitablement,/ Un autre qui fait autant. // Cela peut durer très longtemps,/ Si on ne fat pas d'omelette avant.

One day, Captain Jonathon, aged eighteen, captured a pelican on a far-eastern island. One morning, Jonathon's pelican lays an egg, all white, from which a pelican emerges, resembling it, astonishingly. And this second pelican lays, in turn, an egg, all white, from which emerges, inevitably, another that does the same. This could go on for a very long time, if no one makes an omelet first. (My translation).

This was by far the most difficult of the early texts for the students and, until we compared it to another rather tragic piece with a similar social commentary, they did not really appreciate it.

Some of the students recalled the *PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS* (in this case birds) metaphor, but not all. Then we looked at what it means to be like a bird, flighty? Small brained? Unstable? The poem seems to be about human reproduction, and indeed the textbook suggests in the questions for comprehension that the poem is about mechanical reproduction of style of life, political views, anything you like, *without* reflection—mechanically. Students were still somewhat perplexed, wanting to see it as a rime for children and nothing more. So, I asked them what the omelet could be, and it took quite a while for one of them to come up with something new being created. As the saying goes, if you want to make an omelet you are going to have to break some eggs. The form would have to be changed to break the mechanistic cycle and create something new, something to eat in this case.

In the following class session, I asked them to look at the word, “étonnamment” (astonishingly), and to think about why that word was there. In the French, the pronoun “lui” seems to refer to the first pelican, but it is ambiguous (until you verify the punctuation) inviting the reader to check to see if it is not Jonathon whom the second pelican resembles. Instead, it is Jonathon who is astonished, who is surprised when the repeated act produces the same result. I asked them if they knew anyone who does the same thing over and over expecting a different result, gets the same result as before, but does not change strategies. A student recalled a physics professor from the previous semester who repeatedly asked, “Do you understand?” got blank stares, but kept right on going. Many people failed or dropped the class. Both the teacher *and* the students who stayed and failed were



guilty of having persisted in reproduction of a way of thinking or doing something that was *unproductive*. This student wrote in her journal:

– Although I tried to integrate my new found knowledge of looking deeper into the story, like we did for Fouquet's, I was unable to see beyond the childish rhyme of Le Pelican. I knew there had to be some serious moral to the story but I had no clue what it was. Shortly after we started discussing the imagery of "mechanical reproduction" SO MANY things came to mind (Capitals in the original). Out of all the texts we have read so far, this was the one I understood the least, and it was also the one where discussing the "dead metaphors" helped the most. [...] The discussion helped me realize that everything in the text has its purpose.

We then took up Marie Redonnet's very short story, "Ist et Irt" in which three couples of fishermen and their wives move from lake to lake in search of a new supply of fish. The last couple, happily sufficient unto themselves, has no children and one day, in their old age they go fishing in their rickety boat and sink into the lake. Students saw the circularity of this story and understood that it was about using up resources. I then asked them what they knew about fish as a symbol. They knew immediately about the story of the loaves and fishes in the Bible, and that it meant food and life. From this I asked them what two meanings could they find for the verb "nourrir" (to nourish), and they knew at once that we were talking not just about the body but about the mind and the soul. I asked what the connection could be, and did they see any similarities to "Le Pélican"? They knew that we had been talking about a social critique with the poem, so they made this transition, but they weren't really sure how it happened.

It was when I drew a picture of the movement of the couples from lake to lake on the board. Asking them what happened at each place, we titled each phase of the story, "stable environment," "crisis," "movement," "crisis," "movement," and so on. They saw that, like "Le Pélican," "Ist et Irt" was about mechanically (thoughtlessly) reproducing a life style/cycle that eventually becomes *unproductive*, as the *infertile* couple suggests. I asked them what was the situation in terms of *food* at the end of both stories, and we found that *la fin* (the end) equaled *la faim* (hunger), or a lack of nourishment, not just physically but intellectually. In "The Pelican" there remains the possibility of a future omelet, but in "Ist et Irt" there is no hope at all and the students noticed that the cycle of the story was closed. Another student pointed out that the closed space in this story was different from that of "Victoire des

femmes au Fouquet's", and, indeed it is. So we began to look at another interpretation for a circle, this time it was a prison<sup>6</sup>, but it took my suggestion of "Imagine that someone has committed a crime" to get someone to see that physical death can represent social death and vice versa. The following journal entries appeared in response to this discussion:

– This story was somewhat hard for me to understand [but] after class, I felt I had a much better understanding of what was going on in the story. The whole idea of people moving from crisis to stability was an idea that particularly struck a chord with me. [...] [Re the connection to "The Pelican"], I was able to see (on my own) the way that both stories were making a social criticism about the negative things that can arise when one reproduces mechanically or does other such things in a methodical sort of way without thinking about it.

– Probably the most helpful discussion in this class was about the significance of movement in a work. It's easy to see the different settings in the story as mere neutral backgrounds. [...] We all know that to truly be alive, we must "nourish" not only our bodies but our souls as well... It made me recognize that Isl didn't leave Ism because she wanted bigger fish. She left because she needed love and companionship that Ism was no longer giving her.

– Each time an I-person relocated to a different lake, Ism, Irt, then Ist and Irt, they sought freshness. They wanted to find new land and new lakes, teeming with fish to feed new babies. They wanted to end the hunger in their bellies and their minds. But [...] it was not until we discussed how "le nom se consomme," [the name consumes itself] that I realized the coincidence of hunger, infertility, and inbreeding...

Unmistakably, students are approaching the text with different degrees of confidence, an indication of their own experience and perhaps maturity as readers, and they are finding comparably different degrees of meaning in it, but each one is moving *forward* in his or her own development as a reader.

On the day we took up Bernard Dadié's "La Légende Baoulé", students had seen immediately the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. First, the students summarized the text, and I wrote their sentences on the board. If they started to paraphrase I asked them to generalize. In a few minutes we got a brief description of the story of the origin of the name of a people that involved movement from stability due to a crisis (attack

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<sup>6</sup> As in the configuration of many American cities in which large populations of poor people often live enclosed in the inner city.

by enemies), through a difficult decision (impasse at a raging river) requiring the sacrifice of what is held most dear (a boy-child), transition (the crossing via hippopotamae backs), recognition of the value of the decision (the veneration of the queen who sacrificed her son), and the return to stability signified by the choosing of the name “Baouli”, meaning “the child is dead”.

The students then worked on the interpretation questions. The first pair to speak, about the utility of the Queen’s act of sacrifice, noted that aside from the literal story there was a “dimension” of personal interpretation, that [“in order to move you sometimes have to give up things you hold dear, leave behind things you don’t really need, in order to get on with your life”]<sup>7</sup>. I asked her to speak more about that, and she said [“you have to move from place to place to in order to change your state”]. This was fortuitously timed, as it allowed me to articulate the dead metaphor, STATES ARE LOCATIONS, “les états sont des lieux”, and to explain, using examples such as being *in/dans* a/une depression, *dans* la lune, *on* Cloud Nine<sup>8</sup>.

After discussion of the other questions we came to a prompt from the editors of the textbook to think of other stories of an exodus, or stories of a sacrifice. The students who answered this question started with Adam and Eve and added the exodus of the Jews and the story of Christ. The student who was speaking said he had not read the Bible, but he did know the story of Jesus and he added that the tale of the Baoulé [“seemed to be a metaphor for life”]. Asked for elaboration, he offer that [“in life there are always difficult decision to make if you want to move on”], echoing the spatial interpretation of the girl who answered the earlier question<sup>9</sup>.

At the level of style in this story we covered the usual rhetorical devices, such as the imperfect vs. the passé simple, the repetition of certain image-packed adjectives in sequence (particularly past-partici-

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<sup>7</sup> The student’s French was adequate but is not reproduced here as it was not recorded in class and it is the sense of what she said that is important in any case. The same is true wherever student comments are translated.

<sup>8</sup> After class several students asked to pursue this image and I added UP IS GOOD/DOWN IS BAD, which I also added for the whole class in the next class period, as part of my review of what we did on this day.

<sup>9</sup> He was not repeating what he heard her say, however. I had been to check on each pair’s progress and had sampled what they were going to say; he had come to this conclusion independently, either before coming to class, or in response to the question he was working on in class.

ples that carried the weight of the tribe's flight and fear), and the repetition of soft sounds (l, m, p, s, t) that are soothing to the listener. As this is a story of identity, continuity is brought to the people learning their origins by the repetition of the story and by the repetition (this time *not* a mechanical repetition) of the sounds. We also looked at the images in three songs the tribe sings for clues to the themes of exile/crisis and stability/hope finding them in the pursuit by the "génies" (demons) and the verb "emporter" (to carry away, as with the wind), for the former, and in the images of family, as well as the use of the future tense, for the latter. Finally, reconstituting the list of steps, or STATES/LOCATIONS in the summary they had done, they created a "legend of origin" together as a group endeavor, noting the elements they had used to follow the model.

Student journals brought these comments, of which the first and third are from non-native English speakers:

- Once I read this text on my own, actually I did not get many useful messages out of it, except for the "Liberty". [...] But after attending the discussion in class [...] I could see that it is the story of every individual that has to confront difficulties at one or several points of his life.
- In "La Légende Baoulé," I noticed that there were repetitions of words for emphasizing on the event (sic). In class, I found out that the repetitions here are very different from the other stories that we have read. These repetitions suggested the tribal identity and the continuity of life.
- The discussion of Légende Baoulé was fun, and making up a legend of our own made me realize the difficulty in creating a meaningful legend. I have read the story in high school, but this time around I've uncovered deeper meaning in it. The sacrifice and social and ecological evaluation of societies seems crucial in understanding this legend. [...] states of mind are places where one's heart, thoughts travel and create a mood, a situation of being. [...] Distance and proximity and presence and absence are very clear to me, for I encounter it in my life every moment with anger or happiness, calmness or anxiety, love or dislike. [...] I have learned that it is hard to find the middle ground...
- [re the question about Adam and Eve in the Interpretation section of the textbook with respect to *La Légende Baoulé*] ...I thought of *The Grapes of Wrath* and how similar that story was. It also made me think of immigration. Bit by bit, the stories we read are making more and more sense before I come to class. I no longer have to wait for you to reveal ... the stories. I'm finally being able to discover them on my own.

We were definitely making progress. At this point in the course we had the opportunity to hear Bernard Werber, a best-selling French

author speak about his fiction, among which one of his titles is “Four-mis” (Ants) He also mentioned working on the “architecture” of his fiction<sup>10</sup>. Students picked up on both metaphors immediately. Werber uses a so-called scientific observation to suggest that the structure of the ant society provides an alternate model of community for human consideration in the face of its current world problems. One student had this to say about the architectural metaphor:

– Mr. Werber brought forth many of the topics we have discussed [...] At the very beginning of the conference he mentioned how his writing is like a building. [...] When he mentioned this, I instantly got a picture in my mind of a skyscraper, with its many floors in the place of the many dimensions of his texts.

And another found links between the metaphors of a text is a building, up is good/down is bad, states are locations, and people are insects:

– It would be difficult to discuss Bernard Werber’s ideas with a layered building metaphor but dimensions work well to explain the ‘ant world’, ‘human world’, and ‘angel world’. Or, how about the up-down concept we discussed in class? Werber said that just as we look down on ants, so angels look down on us. That brings us to the metaphor of ‘states of mind are places’. Are angels more joyful because they exist on a higher plane? Do they exist on a higher plane?

And, finally,

– It is an interesting idea to try to use animal civilizations as a metaphor for how human civilizations could be. However, this statement is only a metaphor, not a fact. [...] Ants may live in peace and equality but they do this not by virtue but by instinct.

This student noticed a limitation in the PEOPLE ARE INSECTS metaphor. In class we talked about both the difficulties of mechanical reproduction implied by this student’s use of the word “instinct” and about the problem in Werber’s assertion that he uses only, or at least ninety percent “scientific observation” to construct his fiction. The dead metaphor linking human societies to insect societies derives entirely from the imagination, a domain traditionally non-scientific. They felt it constituted more than ten percent of the “structure” of his text.

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<sup>10</sup> Although he did not actually say “it is like a building”, the student cited above “heard” this and internalized it. His words were, “Je travaille beaucoup sur l’architecture de ma fiction” (“I work hard on the architecture of my fiction”).

This led us into a discussion of the nuances of the metaphor of SEEING IS KNOWING linked to science (observation) and the next text, “Le Prix du Chameau” (“The Price of the Camel”) by Birago Diop. With this text the students began to apply their new tools for entry into a text without my asking them questions. They worked as a whole group on the dimensions of the SEEING IS KNOWING metaphor.

In this story a tribe is literally blinded by a storm, sparing only a single individual, Barane, who is out in the fields when the storm strikes. His grandfather says the village will have a long lesson to learn before their sight will be recovered, and sends Barane to sell the family camel, “avec de la chance” (with luck). Barane turns down many offers until he hears a poor man offer him only a few fagots of wood, “avec de la chance”. Barane returns and his grandfather is initially disappointed in the price Barane got for the camel. Nevertheless, it is cold and he takes a stick of the wood to feed the dying fire. His sight is restored immediately, as it is to all the villagers who come to take a bit of the firewood. They rename the village “Cécité” (blindness), symbolic of “voyance” (“seeing”) (Chevalier and Gheerbrant).

In class, students talked about the journey metaphor, now obvious to them, and about the seeing is knowing metaphor, its association with fire, illumination, warmth and understanding. I had to point out to them, however, that there are two meanings to this metaphor that are clearer in French than in English. In French there are two verbs for “to know,” savoir, which means knowing facts, how to do things, etc., and connaître, which means to be familiar with (ideas, persons, texts), to *interact* with the things known. We went back to the image from “Les Femmes au Fouquet’s” to recall the gaze of the bar’s management that “saw” unaccompanied women and “knew” they were prostitutes. We compared this to the kinds of things it is possible to “know” by observing but without interaction and to the kind of “seeing” that is meant at the end of the story, something more compassionate and comprehensive. But how did they “know” this?

The text valorizes deep, comprehensive, interactive “seeing” but it cannot do it without the story of innocent, ironically literal, *listening*, in this case for the “right” words. Barane is like a child, young, optimistic, and obedient. He sells the camel when he hears the words he thought he was told to listen for and brings back magical sight-restoring wood. He sells the camel when he encounters an interactive situation that valorizes the “orality,” the *community* necessary in HEARING IS

UNDERSTANDING, as in “I hear you,” meaning “I understand your situation, your experience”.

I asked them to recall the kind of seeing in “Fouquet’s,” and they described it as passive, and added that the story questions this kind of seeing, challenging this way of seeing as rarely accurate. They saw, in the course of our discussion, that “Le prix du chameau” linked seeing/understanding to listening/hearing and to an interactive engagement with the world, as these journal entry show:

- I guess it makes sense about hearing being understanding. For the most part, by seeing you can only understand concrete things. [...] listening to someone’s words and tone of voice gives you much more understanding than just looking at him.
- Le Prix du Chameau was difficult to read I felt. [...] The differences between the two types of sight never really hit me until class discussion. After that the story made more sense. It was something that as soon as it was mentioned, I had to hit myself over the head because I should have picked up on that.

As we began the application phase of the course, we let the dead metaphors slip back out of sight in our discussion and students began using their knowledge of dead metaphors to read on their own. The following two journal entries are from the same student two weeks apart, reflecting a move from the initial processes of reading to an increased level of comfort with the texts:

- It seems as though things are coming to me a bit more. [...] A few weeks ago, when the class first started I had no idea where you were pulling some of the interpretations. I truly think I am warming up to the idea of dead metaphors.
- The way we are examining the texts in class has changed dramatically in the past week. [...] Although [it] is different than before, and may be a little more difficult at first, it is also more interesting than just looking at the dead metaphors.

In our discussion of Gisele Prassinis’ “La Gomme,” in which the character literally erases herself until she disappears, the students understood that the surreal literal erasure was the figurative story of a suicide. There was heated discussion about whether it was a real death or a social death made “real”. Several students’ observations about the space we occupy in real life are captured in the following wonderful remark from the journal by a young woman of seventeen, which reveals instinctive existential knowing in a young mind:

– It's almost as if we need others to see us in order to convince ourselves that we exist.

Discussion of Paul Eluard's "Les Yeux Fertiles" brought animated participation about the gaze of the poet and of his beloved. One young woman opened the discussion with "C'est un poème très sex-y" ("This is a very sexy poem"), and there was some tittering but they all agreed that they liked the feelings the poem stirred in them.

On ne peut me connaître/ Mieux que tu me connais// Tes yeux dans  
lesquels nous dormons/ Tous les deux/ Ont fait à mes lumières  
d'homme/ Un sort meilleur qu'aux nuits du monde// Tes yeux dans  
lesquels je voyage/ Ont donné, aux gestes des routes/ Un sens détaché  
de la terre// Dans tes yeux ceux qui nous révèlent/ Notre solitude  
infinie/ Ne sont plus ce qu'ils croyaient être// On ne peut te connaître/  
Mieux que je te connais.

I cannot be known/ Better than you know me// Your eyes in which  
we sleep/ Together/ Have made the light of my manhood/ A better des-  
tiny than the nights of the world// Your eyes in which I journey/ Have  
given the gestures of the road/ A sense of freedom from the earth// In  
your eyes that reveal/ Our infinite intimacy/ Are no more that they  
thought// You cannot be known/ Better than I know you.

(My translation)

The students named the fertility metaphor as "potential" and they understood that the poem was framed to enclose the love between the couple, irregular, fluid, and specific within the mirroring couplets at the beginning and the end. They located the happiness the poet feels *with-in* the gaze of the woman he loves and *within* the poem's structure, and they also noticed the journey and elevation metaphors. At the end of the hour students wrote poems to their "beloved". Several were quite good, including these two<sup>11</sup>:

Dans tes beaux yeux bleus  
Je ressens la certitude  
De notre amour éternel.  
Je ressens la paix,  
Le calme et la sérénité.  
Je ressens le feu  
De notre passion qui ne peut pas s'éteindre.

–

<sup>11</sup> By Michelle Lennox and Elizabeth Hartley, respectively.



Quand je te regarde,  
 Je sens un lien.  
 Tu me comprends et  
 Je ne dois pas faire semblant d'être rien.  
 C'est plus profond que des mots.  
 Il n'y a pas de malentendus  
 Parce que nous nous voyons,  
 La vérité dans nos yeux

The last piece we worked on in the first half of this course was Charles Baudelaire's "Correspondances," which I had been told would be too difficult for this level course. I gave it to them as a handout, without all of the accompanying, carefully arranged, questions that are in the textbook. I chose this poem for its illustration of the notion of *synaesthesia*, the concept that links the figure and the ground, through embodied sensory experience.

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers/  
 Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;/  
 L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles/  
 Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.//  
 Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent/  
 Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,/  
 Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,/  
 Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent//  
 Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,/  
 Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,/  
 -Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants.

The pillars of Nature's temple are alive/ and sometime yield perplexing messages;/ forests of symbols between us and the shrine/remark our passage with accustomed eyes.// Like long-held echoes, blending somewhere else/ into one deep and shadowy unison/ as limitless as darkness and as day,/ the sounds, the scents, the colors correspond.// There are odors succulent as young flesh,/ sweet as flutes, and green as any grass,/ while others -rich, corrupt and masterful-// possess the power of such infinite things/ as incense, amber, benjamin and musk,/ to praise the senses' raptures and the mind's. (Howard)

With this poem we can enlarge Polanyi's often cited statement, "there is no scientific knowledge apart from 'somatic knowledge'," to say that there is no knowledge of *any kind* apart from "somatic knowledge".

Before our discussion students were able to say that they had recognized the NATURE IS A TEMPLE metaphor easily, and that the poem evoked both difference and unity for them. One student focused on the discontinuity between Nature and man in the first stanza,

- The person wanders around, and, every once in a while, he hears confused speech. That is all he can understand from Nature even though

Nature “observes him with familiar sight,” so what I gathered from this was that humans don’t understand Nature, even though Nature understands them.

A second student clearly saw the spiritual and moral elements in the poem and stated that there was unity in time and experience in the poem:

– [A] worshiper is also connected with all other worshipers past, present, and future... Nature is an ultimate unifying force.

A third noted the correspondences in the colors and odors and the seven “comme”s (like), and a fourth called this mixture:

– a conversation going on between different senses: vision, smell and hearing. All mingle in together with nature, which represents a higher being, perhaps even God, since it is housed in a temple. [...] The main point here is the communication and the interaction of senses, movement and freedom of spirit!

Still another, who wrote in French, offered this perceptive remark about the requirements made of the reader by the poet:

– Non seulement est-ce mon cerveau et ma vue qui sont impliqués dans la lecture, mais aussi mon nez, ma peau, et mon âme. (Not only are my brain and my vision implicated in the reading, but also my nose, my skin, and my soul).

Not all the students understood all of the elements of the poem, but many of them were able to pull out important clues that led to a fruitful discussion. I gave them the background of the poem and told them about its importance as a statement of Baudelaire’s theory of *sympathy* and the influence this and other poems by the author have exerted on literature since their publication. One student saw a link to Thoreau and Emerson in American literature, and I verified that these authors would almost certainly have read Baudelaire.

In the course of our discussion, some students noticed the verticality of the first stanza and the horizontal quality of the second, which I drew on the board as an axis. They immediately knew, from the focus of our discussion to date, that the intersection was the body. We thus linked the *sense* of the poem to the *senses* knowable only through the body. I pointed out that in French this link is more visible and more hearable in the homophones “sens” (meaning) and “sens” (sense, as in touch, smell, sight, taste, and hearing) than in English, although we have sayings in English that use each of the senses to talk about mean-

ing and knowing<sup>12</sup>. Finally, I asked them what human activity is responsible for the possibilities of meaning/sense evoked in the poem, and they worked their way through the privileged sense of hearing in the poem to songs, sentences, and words, and finally to “language”.

Following the class a few more comments came in over email, of which the last is, from one of the non-native speakers of English:

– The dead metaphors, “seeing is knowing” and “hearing is knowing,” really add meaning [...] I realized that we don’t really “hear” nature so we don’t understand it and yet nature observes us and understands us perfectly.

– [Before class] the horizontal and vertical space was way over my head. I understood it after we talked about it [...] overall I thought it was [...] a sort of wake-up call to humans. [...] Without nature man would perish and I don’t think we appreciate that.

– I believe that the importance of the five senses was somewhat greater than I had imagined. [...] I found it very interesting the relationship (sic) between the two words “sens” in French.

– The horizontality (sic) and verticality of life [...] reminds me of the heart monitor, the one in hospitals which shows how fast your heart is beating going up and down on a horizontal plane. [...] the poem underlines the idea that life can be divided into different types: physical, something you can grasp [...] and untouchable, like time and age, which you can’t stop.

The first of these students comes very close to naming the linguistic centrality of the correspondence of the senses in the poem. The second is focused outward on Nature, and doesn’t quite make the connection that there is no “Nature” if we don’t perceive it, and that it is *only* perceived through the senses. The third is surprised by attention being drawn to the faculties that allow us to pay attention in the first place. And the last student’s link to the heart monitor is particularly wonderful because it is an instinctive understanding of the relatedness, the inseparability of the tangible and the intangible, which she, nevertheless, tries to separate in the next sentence. In my response to her, I stressed that Baudelaire is saying that the separation we *think* exists is in fact artificial. There is no physical heartbeat that is not *in time*.

I was a little disappointed that none of them reflected on the ultimate connection to language, but it should be remembered, we were

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<sup>12</sup> “I see what you mean” (sight); “I hear you’re pain” (hearing); “There is something fishy about this” (smell); “It left a bad taste in my mouth” (taste); “I grasped/take your point” (touch).

only half way through the course. This poem and the students' relative abilities to read it show, nevertheless, that access to embodied experience, including the connection to speech, is ultimately the only "real" connection we have to our world. Their struggles also show that the degree to which we negotiate the world on "automatic", that is, without considering the background skills we are using unconsciously to name our world, restricts the depth of our perceptions as well as our ability to articulate them. The exercises in this portion of the course show, however, that by learning to *reconstruct* the texts through the dead metaphors students begin to learn not only how they *construct* and continually reconstruct the world, but that they *need to be aware* of their own involvement in these processes in order to understand how form and content function together to create meaning. Locating the "dead" metaphors permits them to experience their own involvement in the act of reading, allowing them to know *how* they know, rather than simply to know *that* text X is about theme Y. The access to textual awareness this method facilitates shows students that they are capable "knowers" and that they can be part of a conversation about anything at all, if they attend to the implicit as well as the explicit dimensions of the "text".

There are several ways to think about this methodology for teaching reading. One is to return to the driving metaphor and remember that students are not trained with the same vehicles that drove literary analysis in the past. They are used to automatic gears which disguise the complexity of the mechanics. In short, they aren't getting the proper driver's training.

Another, and a far richer image, is the wonderful idea of, *THE MIND IS A CATHEDRAL*, which is evoked in the *NATURE IS A TEMPLE* image of "Correspondances". This metaphor allows us to think of minds (of all learners) as large spaces rising above the landscape, with many, many smaller connecting rooms, where rapid mobility among the rooms is always available. The clear-story (the pun is intentional) suggests how the spirit is drawn up to what is gloriously helpful in getting on with life, the understanding (grounded in embodied experience) of one's humanity. This image remodels from the Romanesque to the Gothic; the addition of windows brings light and enlightenment, of course, but more importantly, the structure of the Gothic cathedral has marvelous acoustics. In many such places it is possible to stand in the crossing, at the axis of the nave, the transept, and the apse, and hear whispers in the balcony. As the texts introduced in this course show, hearing is as important, if

not more so, to “knowing” as is seeing. Teaching students to “read/see” their world is also teaching them to listen to and to hear their own voices as well as those of others, and not least of all, to the sounds of Nature’s rustling perfume. Teaching them to engage explicitly with the world only happens by showing them how they *already* do this implicitly.

Equally fruitful is the idea, also evoked in Baudelaire’s poem about the intersecting resonances of life, as well as in the spelling of this word in French, that READING (LANGUAGE) IS A DANCE OF THE SENSES. The dance itself only exists when two “people” dance *together*, moving in space, in time with the music, sensing one another through their bodies and in their reflected gaze. The reader and the literary text must be the partners in a dance for there to be meaning in the reading because, like our interaction in the human community, *being-in-relation* creates the *synaesthesia* of meaning in our lives. Whether listening and looking as we move about in the cathedral or dancing to the music in our hearts, teaching/learning (anything) dwells in the habitat of language. And, the axis of language is in the spatial metaphors of embodied experience.

At a time when the links between reading, (all) language(s), and literatures are becoming the focus of broader inquiry and understanding, it seems both useful and necessary to offer students and teachers a way to enter into texts (and life) without depending on the traditional “hegemony of explicitness and replicability as the criteria of legitimate knowledge” (Gill, p. 85), or abandoning the idea of meaning all together, as in the disappointingly circular reasoning of some other post-modern approaches. For students who have not yet read very much, intertextuality and other kinds of analysis that depend on a wide exposure to a multitude of texts are still out of reach. Polanyi’s philosophy, based on the Gestalt understanding of embodied perception within relation<sup>13</sup>, however, offers both a middle ground and a way forward at a time when teachers and students alike are dissatisfied and frustrated with the suspension of meaning. With the axis of reading practice tethered to corporeal experience in space, an idea that explicitly assumes what we all know implicitly, that “knowing” requires active engagement with what is known, it is not necessary to argue in deconstructed anx-

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<sup>13</sup> See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, and Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation (Poétique de la relation)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990), trans. Betsy Wing, U of Michigan Press, 1997.

iety about what might or might not lie perpetually beneath the layers of a text. It is possible to just get on with reading and, as a dividend, raise the standards of both the teaching and the thinking produced.

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