Metaphor and Metaphysics

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Brian Wicker has written a very curious book.[1] A rough summary of
its contents will indicate the obvious sense in which it's curious: the
second part consists of six critical studies, of Lawrence, Joyce, Waugh,
Beckett, Robbe-Grillet and Mailer; the first, theoretical, part includes
an analysis of metaphor and analogy in relation to Saussure and
Chomsky, a comparison of homopathic and contiguous magic with
myths and fairly-tales, an excursus on causality in science linked with
comments on angels and ecology, and a chapter that brings together
discussions of religious language, Whitehead and Teilhard, and the
differing narrative structures of Old and New Testament stories. It's
a brave author and publisher who can expect a readership for such a
work. But it's the kind of argument that links these components that I
find really curious, since I remain very unclear just what Wicker is
arguing for. There are two major difficulties: the overall argument
seems to be trying to establish a kind of natural theology, a queer kind
of proof that God exists, though Wicker's formulations of his case
never quite commit him to this; and secondly some of his basic argu-
ments seem to me so dubious that, given my respect for Wicker's
previous work, I can only conclude that one of us is deeply muddled
but remain uncertain which.

In chapter I Wicker outlines the familiar post-Saussurean parallel
polarities: language/speech, code/message, paradigm/syntagm,
selection/combination, substitution/context, similarity/contiguity,
metaphor/metonymy. He then suggests that (Thomist) analogy is to
be located with the *second* term in these polarities: Aquinas in apply-
ing 'healthy' to both 'person' and 'urine' is using a kind of metonymic
relationship: healthy urine is both a sign and a part of a healthy
person; that it is a *reliable* sign of a healthy person indicates a *causal*
relationship (healthy person causes healthy urine). Wicker notes that
some metonymic relations have 'causal historical' links ('White House'
for 'President' is one he offers) but then makes a crucial move: 'it is
necessary to my hypothesis . . . that a causal connection underlies *all*
the items on the "syntagmatic" side' of the polarities (17). In other
words, the causal basis of Thomist analogy is also discoverable in all
these terms. In the structure of a sentence, the kind of 'cause' operat-
ing is systemic or a matter of 'mutual contextual determination': in

'John hits Jim' 'John' is a subject because 'hits' is a verb and vice-versa. By contrast, a Humean associationist notion of cause-effect excludes mutual, simultaneous causes. Further, Wicker states, again against Hume, that 'a cause . . . is not a relationship but a thing: an agent that brings about some effect by the exercise of what can only be called its own "natural tendency" to behave in a certain way' (20).

The whole book seems to me to be based here, and to flounder here. It is based here because Wicker later states (76), and often implies, that all metaphors depend on an underlying analogy (a causal relation), that transitive causality is necessary for grasping the ecological balance of Nature, and that it is the relation between analogy and metaphor that allows the possibility of a religious language that recociles talk about the 'God of the philosophers' and the 'God' of biblical faith (e.g. 87, 96f). Why I think that the argument flounders is that Wicker's basic terms seem unclear. He wants a notion of a cause that is 'simultaneous' and one-way, as against Hume's which is temporal and one-way, and he can suggest a two-way 'simultaneity' in the case of a sentence-structure (systemic cause); but in the case of metonymic analogy it's unclear whether the causality is only one-way (the healthy person causes healthy urine but not vice-versa) or two-way (healthy urine as reliable sign 'requires' healthy person as verb 'requires' subject). Further, in the case of sentence-structure, Wicker adds: 'the grammar of the whole system in which the sentence . . . exists ensures' the systemic 'mutual determination' (18); he elaborates this, via a citation of Chomsky[2], into the claim that 'beneath the level of mutual contextual determination . . . there is a fundamental and one-directional causal relation linking that particular utterance to something that might be called its creative source: namely the language itself', as 'a system of generative processes' (19). But is the kind of 'causal' 'generative' 'link' here other than systemic: a relation of whole to part of a definitional kind, a system constituted by mutually requiring processes? Moreover, such terms as 'generative', 'creative source', 'the language itself' and perhaps 'ensure' and 'system' too would seem to be either metaphorical or metonymic-analogical; if metaphorical they would presumably, for Wicker, depend upon an 'underlying analogy' or metonymy; but then is the metonymy involved itself simply a definitional matter, a systemic two-way relation of whole and part (as another of Wicker's metaphors implies: language as 'an active *in*-gredient', 19)? The introduction of transitive causality as meaning 'a thing: an agent that brings about some effect . . .' doesn't really help here, since I'm not sure in what sense 'grammar' or 'language' or 'competence' (or, another, political example, 'the two-party system') is a 'thing', since what Wicker seems to want to mean by 'thing' is some X distinct from and 'outside' its effects (i.e. not related as whole:part), whereas the thrust of his analysis of metonymic

[2]*Wicker cites Chomsky, Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (1965) pp. 3-4, which is,* however, only a brief summary of the conclusions of *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* (1964). Wicker neither examines nor defends Chomsky's arguments in that (early) work.

analogy leads only to a notion of an X which is 'internally' structured (though I'm not sure that his account of other examples of metonymy as resting on a 'causal historical' link really demands either).[3]

The problem is not, perhaps, the intelligibility of what he is trying to assert but rather the way he argues it, so that the use of Chomsky's 'competence' or 'the two-party system' leaves it unclear whether they are themselves analogies of proportion (competence : subject/verb : : two-party system : opposition/government) or metonymic analogies (cf. 'aspects of a single idea', 17), or illustrations, similes, metaphors, examples or what? Which is one of the reasons why I'm not very sure what Wicker is arguing *for* : he links this theoretical discussion to a literary-critical inquiry (Pt. II) which explores the fact that various novelists agree that 'to adopt a metaphorical style is to adopt a metaphysical world-view' (4), or 'to admit the validity of metaphor at all is ipso facto to admit a whole metaphysical system' (7). But these two differing formulations indicate the problem : my 'adoption' of a metaphysical world-view says nothing about the validity (truth) of that world-view, while in the second formulation unless (as is possible) the notion of 'validity' itself demands a particular metaphysical system, my 'admitting' a metaphor (and its metaphysical system) may be more like 'suspending disbelief'. Since what is at issue between the crucial two of his novelists is that Robbe-Grillet wants to eradicate metaphor (and metaphysics) while Mailer exploits the metaphorical play of language (thereby keeping open a metaphysical dimension), the possibility of my merely 'adopting' or 'admitting' metaphorical language would make Wicker's teasing out of the analogical underpinning either curiously irrelevant (I 'adopt' that too) or itself only an example of how *his* use of metaphors ('generate', 'creative source') commits *him* to a metaphysical system—which isn't the point at issue but rather the premise that Robbe-Grillet and Mailer develop different attitudes towards. It is the notions of 'adopt', 'validity' and 'cause' that require examination—but Wicker neither shows that such an examination is impossible without using metaphors and analogies (and he clearly wants to retain some notion of 'literal' statement) nor fully attempts to examine them. Quite possibly this circular tangle betrays my confusion rather than Wicker's, though there is a third possibility I will try to suggest later.

Some discussion of two related sections of the book may first clarify my dissatisfaction. Wicker's analysis of Hopkins's poem *God's Grandeur* (23-28) is interesting in a number of ways. The poem is divided into an octet and a sestet and Wicker argues that the opening octet poses a question ('Why do men now not reck his rod?') in metaphorical terms ('The world is *charged* with the grandeur of God's, etc.) which is answered in the sestet in analogical terms :

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[3] Wicker quotes McCabe, appendix 2 to *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 3 (1964), but McCabe's formulation seems to me both subtly different and more satisfactory: 'A cause is thus a thing exerting *itself*, having its influence or imposing its character on the world' (102).

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> Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
>   World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

He suggests that the octet shows God as both present in the world (and therefore should be recognised, reckoned with) and yet 'blotted out' since 'all is smeared with trade' (the 'growth-processes that were once the true signs of God's creative power' are now invisible, absent). To say that the world is 'charged' with the grandeur of God is to employ a rich metaphor that brings God 'into' the world but leaves open the question whether this phrase is 'only' a metaphor—perhaps simply for non-divine processes of the world. The final lines state how God is still present in the world though apparently blotted out : as the sustaining generative power of the Holy Spirit. For Wicker, the final lines assert 'an underlying *causal* relationship between God and the world'. They obviously do : the 'because' is explicit. But, Wicker comments :

> When we say that God is the cause of the existence of the world, . . . the word is being used analogically. But this does not mean that (as with metaphor) we want to deny the literal truth of the statement. On the contrary, the point of such analogical language is that, if the theory of analogy is true, we can stretch the meaning of the word in question to cover things which, in everyday talk, we do not have in mind (26).

It is obvious now why Wicker needed a concept of a cause that was 'one-way' and 'simultaneous', to allow for the use here of 'because' as meaning God as 'creative source' of the world, neither simply part of the world nor temporally prior to it but an X distinct from yet sustaining it. But two problems seem to hover : if the meaning of 'cause' (its 'literal truth'?) is already established as 'one-way and simultaneous', why are we 'stretching its meaning' to cover the case of God; and if the use here *is* analogical, then in what sense is it 'metonymic' —unless God's causality is the 'whole' of which other causes are a 'part' (which again makes God's kind of causality the 'literal' meaning of the term)? But rather than pursue these termino-logical tangles,[4] I want to point to two features of the poem itself.

By dividing the poem between the octet and the sestet, Wicker can make the claim : 'This second part of the poem is one single, complex causal proposition corresponding to the single metaphorical proposition of the octave' (28). But what happens if we divide the poem differently, as line-divisions, sentence-structure and rhyme-pattern allow us to, and then quote the middle part as a *whole* poem :

> Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
>   And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

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[4]Wicker's first Note (107) acknowledges that 'The justification for analogous usage . . . itself depends on an analogous use of "cause"', and that 'This argument is clearly circular'; but his attempt to deny that the circle is vicious seems to me both specious and self-destructive.

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And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—

It's a less interesting poem, certainly, but it's only that curious dash at the end which indicates that anything is missing.[5] This poem, like the world it depicts, is sufficiently self-contained. The opening four lines and the last two of the 'longer version' suddenly seem arbitrarily supplementary, mere assertion; they perhaps demand each other, the rest of the poem doesn't demand them. In other words, there is no essential connection between the two statements the poem can be seen as making: the 'shorter version' simply asserts the abiding creativity of nature; the longer version adds an opening question which implies an answer (which together constitute another assertion) but the formulation of the question as metaphorical and of the answer as analogical doesn't explain or clarify the god-less (and 'literal'?) statement they enclose. In other words, neither the octet nor the sestet is 'a single, complex proposition' but rather each is two assertions, one god-less, the other 'god-full'. The relation between them is something I'll come back to.

Secondly, as Wicker rightly notes, Hopkins's final lines have developed from three other texts: *Deuteronomy* 32 : 11 :

Like an eagle watching its nest,
Hovering over its young,
He (Yahweh) spreads his wings out to hold him
He supports him on his pinions,

echoed by *Genesis,* God's spirit hovered over the waters', and then adapted by Milton

Thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
And mad'st it pregnant (P.L. I, 19-22),

The awkward presence of 'waters' in *Genesis* contradicts the notion of *creatio ex nihilo,* so Milton modifies the metaphor to 'impregnating' the 'Abyss'. But, as Wicker points out, 'such a metaphor can only apply to a process *within* the world' and Hopkins, recognising this, uses the image precisely for the mode of God's presence within the

[5]My treatment of this poem clearly raises problems of whole/part relations ('organic form'?) and 'quality' (why is either version a good poem?) that Wicker doesn't examine. Note that the 'shorter version' could almost have been written by a Robbe-Grillet.

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world. But the point that seems insistent here is that Milton's inability to grasp the nature of *creatio ex nihilo* in a metaphor and Hopkins's adaptation to express God's sustaining-creative power both bring into play again the related concepts of time and cause. Hume's concept is of cause as *temporal* and one-way; Wicker wants a one-way causal relation which I (and he) earlier termed 'simultaneous'. But that 'simultaneity' needs questioning. Wicker touched on the problem (18):

> in the case of a simultaneously co-existing structure such as a sentence or picture, there is no question of one part preceding another in time. (Of course, a sentence will take time to utter or write or read; and a picture will take time to paint or scan fully: but once there it is a simultaneous whole, a 'gestalt' that exists in a comprehensive present.)

But 'simultaneous' here really means *a-temporal* not 'existing at the same time': the *structure* of a sentence is not temporal in any normal sense. The term 'once' in 'once there' is, however, temporal, since it is linked to 'there' (and seems to refer at best to the painting as an object); in his other example, a different phrase occurs with similar intent: 'Given the two-party system, both propositions [party A is the opposition (because) party B is the government] are true, although in a Humean sense, neither can be said to be either "effect" or "cause" ' (19). But 'given' here is a logical term, as is 'true'—there is a *valid* relation between premise and conclusion (a point Hume wouldn't deny). What is clearly at stake here, I think, is the relation between logic ('given') and time ('once') in causality: whether a cause is temporally as well as logically 'prior' to its effect. Wicker's use of 'once' and 'simultaneous' obscures that problem—while his 'given' seems almost to suggest that the two-party system is a creation *ex nihilo!*[6]

Wicker's second chapter raises related problems. He sees a parallel between similarity (metaphor) and homeopathic magic: the 'idea of bringing about an effect in A by doing the same [sic] thing to a similar object B in a similar situation'; and between contiguity (metonymy) and contagious magic, which 'depends on actual contact between B and A' (41). Homeopathic magic 'would have to be formulated as "A brought about F in B" ', contagious magic in the form 'C because D' where A and B stand for things, but C and D for clauses. In contiguous magic 'the events which are described in each of the clauses (say, *Cinderella's pumpkin turned into a golden coach* because *the fairy godmother waved her hand*) are in themselves quite intelligible. We can "visualise" them without raising any questions as to their explanation. What is not intelligible is precisely their connection, that is to say the relation denoted by "because" ' (42). I am puzzled. Someone waving her hand is perhaps quite intelligible (she

[6] Cp. Wicker's earlier odd use of 'causal historical' to account for some metonymies; what is involved there is the relation between logic and history (e.g. the relation between Hegel's *Logic* and Marx's *Capital*). This reference to the 'two-party system' is, surprisingly, one of the very few to politics—unless one so classifies the discussion of ecology.

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may think she's a fairy godmother, e.g.) but a pumpkin turning into a golden coach is not 'in itself quite intelligible' and I for one can't 'visualise' it without raising questions as to its explanation (and if anyone else said they were 'describing' what had happened, I would probably say they'd *only* visualised or imagined it). It's *not* the 'because' that bothers me in the sentence; it's 'turned' and 'fairy godmother'. Further, Wicker says: 'in a proposition of the other sort (say, "the fairy godmother brought about the form of a golden coach in the pumpkin") the *whole* of what is being described [sic: imagined?] is strictly speaking unintelligible'. But Wicker now seems almost to have reversed his earlier position: he had characterised 'transitive causality' as indicating 'an agent that brings about some effect by the exercise of what can only be called its own natural tendency to behave in a certain way' (20) and cited McCabe where McCabe formulates transitive causality as 'A brings it about that F is in B'. (McCabe also says: 'when you know what something is you already know what it is likely to do—it is indeed the same thing fully to understand the nature of a thing and to know what it will naturally do . . . to understand the cause is just to understand that it naturally produces this effect'. In that sense, I might fully understand 'fairy godmother' as a literary convention within a fictional genre).[7] But the problem is that Wicker's homeopathic magic is both transitive causality and strictly speaking unintelligible—so I'm not sure whether the argument in Chapter I employing 'transitive causality' was itself 'intelligible'. However, for Wicker, homeopathic magic, like all 'metaphor' poles, depends upon its 'metonymic' pole:

> Propositions describing homeopathic magic are always reducible at their critical points to propositions about contagious magic and such propositions are themselves simply propositions that combine two clauses in a single context, the special feature of which is that the contextual relation signified by 'because' is in principle wholly beyond explanation. But 'magic' is not the only case of this kind: the *creatio ex nihilo* whereby, theologians say, God brought the world into existence (and indeed whereby he keeps it in existence too) is another instance of the same principle of sheer contiguity (42).

The re-entry of *creatio ex nihilo* seems to redeem Wicker's consistency: *all* transitive causality is 'strictly speaking unintelligible' because (?) it depends upon God's causality, the causal processes in the world require God's creative-causal act. But now I'm not sure that consistency is retained in another respect: if *creatio ex nihilo* is a kind of contagious magic, then it is to be formulated as 'E because F' in which there are two clauses both of which are 'in themselves quite intelligible'; but E would contain the phrase 'ex nihilo' and F at least the subject 'God'. But I don't find either of these terms 'in themselves

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[7] Cf. the discussion in chapter 4 of 'Yahweh' as a literary 'character'; the question of the *cognitive* force of literature underpins the whole book, but I'm not sure that it can be solved along Wicker's lines here, that 'stories are good, and sometimes necessary, to think with'. Perhaps related to this are the questionable phrases 'description, and *in a sense,* explanation' (43) and 'a coherent religion cannot do without a philosophical *belief* in God' (99n)—both emphases mine.

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quite intelligible' and I'm not sure that Wicker would claim to (and what would it mean for God to be the subject of a clause anyway?). To put it mildly, when he goes on to say that 'magic is a *metaphor* for creation' (43) he seems to be back in a circle. To put the problem in terms of *God's Grandeur,* the relation between the god-less and the god-full statements or 'clauses' in the sestet is finally only one of juxtaposition (mere contiguity); the 'because' of the last two lines is not the link but part of a detachable assertion; the real link is an enigmatic '____'.

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I don't want to pursue Wicker's argument further, though the rest of the book contains many interesting sections and problems. What needs to be noted instead are two overall points. First, that in sketching certain queries above I have in a sense been playing the *naif*. I know, of course, that many of the problems I crudely gesture at have received extensive treatment by Aquinas, among others. The various possible relations, e.g., between creation, *creatio ex nihilo* and the (non)-eternity of the world were seen differently by Maimonides, St Albert, Aquinas and Augustine—not to mention Hopkins's Scotus (cf *Ox* II, 1, iii, 19). The difficulty is that Wicker's mode of argument raises these issues and both implies and rests upon as well as using something like Aquinas's answers. But he doesn't argue for the validity of the Thomist metaphysics; nor does he argue for the validity of Chomsky's claim. Instead, he seems to use Chomsky as a premise from which to re-build certain features of Aquinas's metaphysics. He seems to suggest that if one wants to work with the dichotomies of paradigm/ syntagm and metaphor/metonymy you must be led to a belief in the existence of God; i.e. that way of grasping the structure of a linguistic utterance leads, if followed through, to a recognition of the need for a First Cause in a non-Humean sense. But I've tried to show as it's presented that the argument slides over problems; it holds, if at all, I suspect, only if the whole range of Thomist responses to other problems is available to shore it up, only if, in other words, the reader has already accepted a Thomist metaphysical system.

Which leads to my second point, fairly drastically compressed. Fergus Kerr, in a number of articles in recent years, has been suggesting that, in the wake of Heidegger and Derrida, we need a *post-*metaphysical theology.[8] His case can't be re-presented here, but two particular texts of Derrida are worth recalling. In *White Mythology*: *metaphor in the text of philosophy,* Derrida probes the problems in Aristotle's definition of metaphor, a definition 'the whole surface of which is worked by metaphor' (*Marges* 276); he eventually concludes:

Metaphor, then, always has its own death within it. And this death

[8]*New Blackfriars*, December 1973, August and October 1974, July 1975, February 1976. It's worth noting that Wicker's essays on Joyce, Beckett and Robbe-Grillet seem to me the least satisfactory; Derrida has affinities with all three.

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is undoubtedly also the death of philosophy. But this 'of' has a double meaning. Sometimes the death of philosophy is the death of a form (*genre*) belonging to philosophy in which philosophy itself is reflected upon and summed up, recognises itself in fulfilling itself; sometimes the death is of a philosophy which does not see itself die and never again finds itself (323).

In an earlier text, *Ousia et Grammé,* Derrida analysed Aristotle, *Physics* Bk. IV, on 'time'. Part of his argument there states:

> The entire weight of Aristotle's text is shored up by a tiny word, one scarcely visible. . . . What sets the text going and hinges the whole discourse, what from then on will constitute the linch-pin of metaphysics, this little key the play of which both locks and unlocks the history of metaphysics, this skeleton which supports and shapes every conceptual move in Aristotle's discourse, is the tiny word $\eta\mu\alpha$ (*Marges,* 64).

$\eta\mu\alpha$ means 'together', 'all at once', 'both together', 'at the same time', 'simultaneous'. Its use as a crucial term in the argument about 'time' finally begs the question of the relation between 'two nows' since $\eta\mu\alpha$ itself involves concepts of time, duality and contiguity. Its use is not, I think, so recognised in Aquinas's *Commentary* on the *Physics,* but in the light of the similarly hingeing use Wicker makes of the term 'simultaneous' (as both 'mutual' and 'at the same time') and his closely related uses of 'once' and 'contiguity', a re-reading of the *Physics* and the *Commentary* (and Hegel's *Logic* and Heidegger) seems required. Put that another way: in Fergus Kerr's words (*NB,* Dec 73), 'The flight to biblical studies and patrology, or to sociology and poetry, so typical of the opposing wings in the new generation . . . must lead to an impasse in the long run unless we face up to the philosophical problems that all these various disciplines ignore'. An article cannot do more than raise again those problems, and this is not the occasion on which to probe Derrida's own text for a-metaphysical god-talk possibilities, but in recording my gratitude to Brian Wicker for tackling philosophical problems in relation to both biblical studies and (unlike Lonergan) the creative language of literature, I still remain without much illumination as I ponder again Nietzsche's original broken thought:

> 'Reason' in language: oh what a deceitful old woman!
> I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar. . . . (*Twilight of the Idols*)

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