

Metaphor as Metalanguage in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's "The Horses of Meaning"

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Abstract: *Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's innate concern with poetic language per se, as a poet, translator, and scholar, is evident in many of her poems, such as "Early Recollections", "Studying the Language", "Translation", "The Horses of Meaning", and "Gloss/Clós/Glas", among others. For this reason, this article investigates, from the perspective of Jakobson's theoretical considerations in "Linguistics and Poetics", Chuilleanáin's handling of poetic language specifically in "The Horses of Meaning" (Selected Poems, 2009), in order to evaluate not only how the interaction among the different functions of language becomes concretized in the verbal structure of the poem, but also how the use of metaphor and metalanguage – conveyed by the title and developed throughout the poem – will further emphasize the predominance of the poetic upon the metalingual, referential, emotive, and conative functions. In this way, "The Horses of Meaning", besides being a "visual and auditory experience", becomes paradigmatic of Jakobson's statement that "the poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function".*

When asked in an interview (2009) about her translations of poetry and the roles they have played in her own compositions, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin stated: "I very much want to preserve the original author's attitude. I've written a number of poems about translation, especially 'Gloss/Clós/Glas', and about language". Considering that Ní Chuilleanáin has published six collections of poetry, besides her translations of Irish, Italian and Romanian poets, and that, as Seamus Heaney has stressed,

while her numerous images of mythical figures, travelers, pilgrims, and women – especially of the veiled subject of the nun – remind us of our deepest inner sanctum, with its litany of spiritual truths, human fears and needs, these images also catalogue the importance of the ordinary and the domestic as new metaphors for human experiences and emotions (Chuilleanain, back cover)

it is at least challenging to examine this other facet of her poetry, which she herself has pointed out: her concern with language. This awareness is evident in poems such as “Early Recollections”, “Studying the Language”, “In Her Other House”, “Translation”, “The Horses of Meaning”, and “Gloss/ Clós/ Glas” (Chuilleanáin 2009), among others.

For this reason, this article examines this concern, as it appears specifically in “The Horses of Meaning” (2001), in order to better evaluate how far her use of metaphor as metalanguage expresses the challenge presented by Jakobson’s rhetorical question in his well-known essay “Linguistics and Poetics”: “What is the indispensable feature inherent in any piece of poetry?” (358) As Jakobson claims, having presented the six basic **factors** of verbal communication¹ and the corresponding scheme of the six functions of language²,

the . . . focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language. . . . any attempt to reduce the sphere of poetic function to poetry or to confine poetry to poetic function would be a delusive oversimplification. Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function . . . (356)

Bearing also in mind that “the analysis of verse is entirely within the competence of poetics and the latter may be defined as that part of linguistics, which treats the poetic function in its relationship to the other functions of language” (Jakobson 359), let us now examine one possible reading of “The Horses of Meaning” in which these theoretical considerations will be used to enhance Ní Chuilleanáin’s manipulation of verbal art, to bring about the predominance of the poetic function of language over the others.

The semantic challenge presented in the title already points to a contrast between the concreteness of ‘Horses’ as “object language” and the abstractness of “Meaning” as metalanguage (Jakobson 356) It is the contrast between these two levels of language that will be developed in the poem, as the different symbolic connotations of “horses” will gradually release “meaning” from its stable, from the “prison-house of language”, allowing it to express and develop unexpected connections beyond the referential function of language.

The very definition of horse – (from AS *horse*) as “a large, strong animal, *Equus caballus*, with four legs, solid hoofs, and flowing mane and tail” – already anticipates some of the characteristics which will become visualized in the poem – hooves, mane, tails – and, equally important, the fact that the horse was domesticated long ago for drawing or carrying loads and riders. Keeping these two aspects in mind, the background information further provided by the symbolic associations attributed to the horse becomes more easily grasped, thereby allowing a broader understanding of the metaphorical meanings the horses will acquire in the poem. Moreover, taking into consideration the fact that one cannot separate Ní Chuilleanáin’s cultural frame from her poetry, and thus that Irishness – mythology, stories, tales, history – imbues the poem, there is still this larger sphere of symbolic reference that can be brought into play in order to discuss the function of the horses in the internal context of the poem.

Thus, on the one hand, animals symbolize the essence of fertility and vitality in Celtic and Welsh mythology, because they are living, moving, and growing, providing continued life for the tribes through their meat, skins, and bones; in addition, they are a connection with the realm of spirits and the gods through their use in the hunt, and the search for secrets and wisdom, while divination of future events and past wisdom can also be gained through the proper use of animals as Noodén wrote. Horses were also sacred to many Indo-European goddesses, as they were linked to mystery and magic.

On the other hand, even considering de Vries's definition that "significant indefiniteness is the mark of symbols," additional symbolic associations of the horse, relevant in the context of this poem, confirm and complement the meanings above. As Juan-Eduardo Cirlot points out, the horse is an ancient symbol of the cyclic movement of the world of phenomena; horses thus symbolize the cosmic forces that arise out of primigenial chaos. The horse also stands for intense desires and instincts, in accordance with the general symbolism of the steed. It also plays an important part in a great number of ancient rites and, considering that the horse pertains to the natural, unconscious, instinctive zone, in antiquity it was often endowed with certain powers of divination. In fable and legend, horses, being clairvoyant, are often assigned the task of giving a timely warning to their masters. For Jung, the horse expresses the magic side of Man, that is, intuitive understanding. On account of his fleetness, the horse can also signify the wind and sea-foam, as well as fire and light (Cirlot 152).

Moreover, two further symbolic relationships are of immediate interest to us, for they lead us directly to the title of Ní Chuilleanáin's poem: the horse as a mount for the gods and for the body, with the spirit as the rider, and the horse as a source of poetic inspiration (from Hippocrene >"horse-well"): a spring on Mount Helicon of the Muses; so, to drink Hippocrene means to get inspiration (de Vries 259-262).³ Both associations allow us to identify the horses as "carriers" of meaning with the very meaning of metaphor (> Greek "transference") – "a trope, or figurative expression, in which a word or phrase is shifted from its normal uses to a context where it evokes new meanings" (Preminger & Brogan 760) – as they become the embodiment of "transference of meaning"; and, simultaneously, the embodiment of poetic inspiration as a source for the creation of new metaphors.

In relation to the abstract noun "meaning," Geoffrey Leech distinguishes the word used "in the narrow sense of 'cognitive', or 'denotative meaning' . . . that is the concern of the dictionary-maker" from "a very broad use of the term encountered in literary studies, where the 'meaning' of a poem, line, word, may include everything that is communicated by it" which Leech prefers to call the "TOTAL SIGNIFICANCE of a piece of language" (40). Thus, as "meaning" is defined as "that which is conveyed, denoted, signified, or understood by acts or language; the sense, signification, or import of words; significance; force" (Webster. 1979.1115), it becomes clear that, as we follow the horses' trajectory in the poem, we are not only following their acts literally, but also trying to understand through the horses, as carriers of meaning, the metaphorical significance of their flight as metalanguage.

With these references and concepts in mind, one can follow more easily the implications and developments of the title along the lines of the poem:

Let their hooves print the next bit of the story:
Release them, roughmaned
From the dark stable where
They rolled their dark eyes, shifted and stamped –

Let them out, and follow the sound, a regular clattering
On the cobbles of the yard, a pouring round the corner
Into the big field, a booming canter.”

Now see where they rampage,
And whether they are suddenly halted
At the check of the line westward
Where the train passes at dawn –

If they stare at land that looks white in patches
As if it were frayed to bone (the growing light
Will detail as a thickening of small white flowers),
Can this be the end of their flight?
The wind combs their long tails, their stalls are empty.

As the graphological level reveals, “The Horses of Meaning” is composed of four free-verse strophes, with four, three, four and five lines respectively. This apparent formal freedom from regular meter, rhyme and line length – thus reproducing the flight of the released horses along the field – is nevertheless compensated for by phonological, syntactic and semantic parallelisms, binding the strophes in sound, syntax and meaning, as will be seen.

The first strophe starts with an exhortation: “Let their hooves print the next bit of the story:”. This orientation toward the addressee, by bringing out the connotative function of language, simultaneously stresses the fact that, as imperative sentences are not liable to a truth test (Jakobson.1960.355), the exhortation has its referential function almost obliterated, as it urges us to allow metaphorical meanings or the poetic function of language – conveyed by the symbolism of the horses as sources of poetic inspiration – to become dominant in the message. It thus corroborates the paradox contained in the title between the literal and the metaphorical uses of “horses” and “meaning”.

The hooves, being moon-shaped, are sacred to the Triple Great Mother goddess, thus further confirming the symbolism of the horse as a sacred animal. Moreover, as their rounded shape is iconic of printing types, the horses, by stamping their hooves on the ground – and making marks on it by pressure, will literally be printing “the next bit of the story” on it – be it “on the cobbles of the yard” or on the “big field”, as the second strophe will reveal. This act also recalls the legend of the source of poetic inspiration as springing up at the stamping of the hoof of Pegasus, a release of energy – physical and mental – that is again symbolic of the horse. The very word “story” corroborates the

predominance of the poetic over the metalingual function, as the “story” is subordinated to the metaphorical energy of the horses’ hooves.

The colon that follows introduces another exhortation, as the addresser now urges the addressee to free the horses from their stalls: “Release them, roughmaned/ From the dark stable where /They rolled their dark eyes, shifted and stamped –”. The repetition of the connotative function thus establishes a syntactic parallelism between lines one and lines two to four, thereby foregrounding an implicit semantic parallelism, for lines two to four are an amplification of the meaning of line one.

Considering that roughmaned, which brings to mind the “flowing mane” of the dictionary definition as well as the symbolism of hair – associated with magical and spiritual power; with fire and sun-rays; and with fertility – it becomes clear that this foregrounded characteristic further enhances the energy, the primitive forces, and the fertility that are latent in these animals, and that will now be released.

The darkness of the stable – a guarded place – further confirms the symbolism of darkness as primeval chaos and mystery, suggesting that, in the dark, enclosed space of the stable, the power of the horses as carriers of meaning remains as a potentiality: it cannot be exerted yet, but will emerge from that darkness. This darkness is reiterated in their “dark eyes”, thus adding to the symbolism of the eyes as knowledge, understanding, guardian of the spiritual, expressive of mood, the soul and the mystic centre, this dark and mysterious “quality”. The combination “rolled their dark eyes”, recalling the proverb “a rolling eye, a roving heart”, anticipates the horses’ actions of glancing and turning in different directions, while it also confirms the state of expectancy the horses are in before they leave the stable, as they impatiently “shifted” from one place to another, “and stamped.”

“Stamped” not only foregrounds the symbolism of stamping the earth with bare feet as a fertility-rite, and as a re-entry into the womb of the earth, resulting in a state of ecstatic unconsciousness. When applied to the horses, the act of stamping corroborates the association of the horse with fertility and sacredness in Celtic mythology, as well as the symbolism of hair (through roughmaned), thus increasing the potential energy in the horses, still hidden in the darkness of the stables, and of their eyes, as guardians of the spiritual. “Stamped” concomitantly recalls “print”, for both actions are performed by the horses’ hooves, as we have seen, thus reinforcing again the multiple significance of the images and actions in the poem, as the literal meaning of “stamped” cannot be detached from the association of the horses with sacredness, fertility and poetic inspiration. Thus, if the referential function remains visible, it is simultaneously contaminated by the polysemy of the title, further corroborated by the expansion of the exhortation and the symbolic implications of nouns and verbs.

Besides the syntactic parallelism concretized by the connotative function of the exhortation, several sound parallelisms, plus “free repetition” (Leech 94) in “dark” – such as alliteration in horses/hoofs; story/stamped/stable/; release/roughmaned/rolled; meaning/maned; and assonance in horses/story; meaning/ release; maned/ stable – by bringing out the latent associations among these words, further bind these lines

phonologically, as well as semantically, thereby confirming Jakobson's assertion that "words similar in sound are drawn together in meaning" (371).

The second strophe continues the connotative function of language and the parallelistic syntactic structure, as the addresser now urges us readers to "Let them out, and follow the sound, a regular clattering / On the cobbles of the yard, a pouring round the corner / Into the big field, a booming canter."

While "let out" reiterates the same basic exhortation as the first strophe, suggesting that we are in charge of releasing the horses, the next two imperatives – "follow their sound", as well as "see where they rampage" – imply that we have already lost our power over the horses, for they have left us behind. In a passive attitude, we can only follow their sound, which suggests – through its symbolism as the magical cause of the birth of the world, the first of all things to be created, and through the horses as sources of poetic inspiration – that the clattering of their hooves on the cobbles marks the beginning of poetic creation. One just needs to follow, from now on, this "regular clattering on the cobbles of the yard".

The cobble-stones, by retrieving the symbolism of the stone – associated with hardness, strength, and the bones of the earth – remind us again that clattering is also a fertility rite, and that the horses need to go on stamping on the ground in order to release the mysteries and energy contained in the cobbles. The yard – this enclosed or partly enclosed space near or round the stable – in its turn prepares us visually for the larger space of the big field in line seven, thus providing a transition from the enclosed space of the stable to the openness and freedom of the field, an amplification that is again suggestive of the horses' metaphorical trajectory from the narrow sense of "meaning" to its total significance in a text.

This visual amplification is further enhanced by an increased foregrounding of sound, as the "regular clattering on the cobbles" is now followed by "(...) a pouring round the corner / Into the big field, a booming canter." In this way, from "a regular clattering" – conveying a long, dull, confused sound, with the horses still in the yard – to "pouring" – this steady flow of sound, already coming out freely "round the corner – to "a booming canter" – the deep, hollow sound of an easy, gentle gallop – this amplification of the sound produced by the hooves confirms that the horses are now in total liberty. The spatial freedom provided by the field is further reinforced by its symbolic connections with fertility, freedom from restraint, unlimited possibilities of action, thus again making the horses emblematic of these connections.

The parallelistic syntactic structure in "let.../release" in strophe I, and "let.../follow" in the second strophe, projecting the connotative function of language, is now reinforced by a series of nouns related to sound, such as "sound/clattering/pouring/booming canter", all of them conveying the reverberation of the horses' galloping in the yard and through the fields, while several phonological parallelisms further corroborate the close connection between sound and meaning, in this strophe: the alliteration in clattering/ cobbles/ corner/ canter – the plosive 'k' adding a particular abruptness of

sound to the nouns, thus enhancing the noise of “clattering”; big/booming; regular/round; assonance in out/sound/round/; canter/stamped; follow/ cobbles/ pouring/corner; field/release/ meaning; canter/stamped; plus the feminine rhyme in corner/ canter. All of them remind us again that this poem is not only a visual, but also an auditory experience.

The third strophe presents the addresser’s last exhortation to the addressee: “Now see where they rampage,/ And whether they are suddenly halted/ At the check of the line westward/ Where the train passes at dawn –”. “See” reminds us again, like “follow”, that we are no longer in control of the animals. We can only watch them running riot, boisterously and uncontrolled, thus implying that, released from their stalls, as carriers of meaning and as a source of poetic inspiration, they are ready to create new, unpredictable metaphors. Nevertheless, the alternative introduced by “whether” exhorts us to continue watching to see if the horses’ rampaging might be suddenly brought to a stop when they reach the railway line.

Beyond the visual impact of the images and in spite of the referential function of “At the check of the line westward /Where the train passes at dawn–”, the metaphoric level of the poem – plus the symbolic associations of “train” with progress, and of “westward” with completion and darkness – allows us to read the “check of the line westwards” as obstacles of civilization at which the horses are brought to a halt. Contrasting with “westward”, “dawn”, in its turn, enhances the appearance of light in this imaginary scene, in which landscape, animals and the railway line are immersed in the colors of day-break: symbolic of creation, the unconscious broadening into consciousness,⁴ “dawn” consequently also transforms the familiar landscape into a metaphorical scene, in which the horses as poetic inspiration gallop freely in the open spaces, until they are halted by the barriers of civilization – rules, norms, compartments. Phonological parallelisms reinforce the tightness of the free verse and of the parallelistic syntactic structures, such as alliteration in where/whether/where; west/ward; see/suddenly; assonance in rampage/ passes; halted/dawn; where/whether/check/where; and consonance in train/dawn.

The fourth strophe, in apposition to the conjunctive phrase presented in the third strophe, introduces another supposition as to the horses’ behavior, a possibility that is turned into a rhetorical question, which, at a first reading, is left unanswered: “If they stare at land that looks white in patches/ As if it were frayed to bone (the growing light/ Will detail as a thickening of small white flowers),/ Can this be the end of their flight?/ The wind combs their long tails, their stalls are empty.”

This land at which the horses stare, as if seeking for something or examining the landscape, presents another amplification of the space in which the horses were kept – from the enclosed space of the stable, to the yard, to the big field and to the land – thus necessarily incorporating the symbolic associations of the field with fertility, space, freedom and unlimited possibilities for action. The implications of “land”, in this way, confirm that the space which the horses look at, as carriers of meaning, has extended its metaphorical meanings in the same way that the actions of the horses, impatiently stamping on the ground, clattering on the cobbles, cantering into the big field to then

rampage at their will, form a *crescendo* of movement and sound that parallels the larger spaces available to them.

Nevertheless, if this land “that looks white in patches/ as if it were frayed to bone”, implying that its whiteness is due to the earth having been exhausted – by overuse – and thus has lost its positive associations with fertility, one could venture another reading, related to the metaphorical implications of the horses: as carriers of poetic inspiration, are they looking at the death of old meanings, and thus – as the rhetorical question “can this be the end of their flight?” confirms – are they hesitating to continue their trajectory of bringing new meanings to worn-out metaphors?

The parenthetical sentence that follows –“(the growing light/ Will detail as a thickening of small white flowers.)” – giving a positive explanation of the white patches, again enhances the symbolism of light transmitting its cosmic energy and creative force to these small plots of ground, from which small white flowers will emerge, thereby revitalizing the worn-out land through their associations with beauty, purity and regeneration.

The subsequent question “Can this be the end of their flight?” corroborates the metaphorical meaning of the horses as poetic inspiration, for flight – with its multiple meanings of a journey made by flying through the air; hurrying or running away; and rising above the ordinary – already anticipates its symbolic associations with space and light, power or strength, ‘transcendence of growth’, thought and imagination. In this way, the poetic function of language once more predominates over the referential function, as the visual experience of the horses’ literal flight is further enhanced by the figurative meaning of flight, while the foregrounding of the only instance of end-rhyme in the poem in “/light/ flight”, with “white in patches” and “white flowers ” acting as internal rhyme, further enhances “the semantic relationship” between these “rhyming units”(Jakobson 367).

Moreover, if a rhetorical question “is a question asked, not to evoke an actual reply, but to achieve an emphasis stronger than a direct statement”, and if “the most common rhetorical question is one that won’t take ‘yes’ for an answer”(Abrams 149), it becomes evident that the horses will not be stopped by “the check of the line westward”. They will resume their flight in order to continue the transmission of the hidden meanings of poetry kept in the “stables” of language.

The last line of the fourth strophe – “The wind combs their long tails, their stalls are empty.” – brings the metaphorical associations of the horses to a close, as their long tails – symbolic of animal power, and expression of an animal’s mood – are combed by the wind. Keeping in mind that the comb is symbolic of fertility, related to sunrays and to ‘loose hair’ – as a release of the magic power concentrated in the hair – while the wind – this active form of air – symbolizes the creative spirit, fertility, regeneration, freedom, and is thus the inducer of ecstasy, poetic inspiration, and life-force,⁵ it becomes clear how the overlapping of all these symbolic connotations related to the horses, as “concretive” (Leech 158) metaphors of poetic inspiration, foregrounds the pregnancy and simultaneous lightness of this line. As the phonological parallelisms of this line

confirm, the consonance in land/ end/ wind, plus the combined density of nasals (in wind/ combs/ long/) and liquids (their/ long/ tails/ their/ stalls/ are) add a “potential suggestibility” (Leech 97) of lightness and softness to the line, while the repetition of the plosive /t/ in “stalls/empty”, drawing both words together in sound, reminds us of the horses’ enclosure, which is now empty.

The irreversibility of their flight is thus corroborated by the stalls remaining empty: the “dark stable” from which the addresser exhorts us to release them, recalled here in the image of the empty stalls, rounds off the message, implying that, once released from the prison-house of language, the metaphorical meanings of words will never become imprisoned again and the horses will continue their flight over the fertile fields of language, for the wind of poetic inspiration continues to comb their tails.

In this way, although the expressive and the connotative functions of language become apparent in the addresser’s exhortation to release the horses, while the referential function allows us to visually follow the horses’ trajectory from the stables to the open fields, it is the poetic function which predominates, even over the metalingual function, as the horses, as metaphors, gallop with their meanings through the lines of the poem.

Notes

- 1 The addresser sends a message to the addressee; to be operative the message requires a context referred to, graspable by the addressee; a code common to the addresser and addressee; and a contact, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication.
- 2 Referential (orientation toward the context), emotive (orientation toward the addresser), conative (orientation toward the addressee), phatic (orientation toward contact), metalingual (orientation toward the code) and poetic (orientation toward the message).
- 3 All further symbolic references will be taken from this source.
- 4 Day-break was Yeats’s favorite moment of perception (de Vries 130).
- 5 And, for Dylan Thomas, the divine breath of poetry (Vries. 502)

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