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Anita Wohlmann, *Metaphor in Illness Writing: Fight and Battle Reused* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022, ISBN: 9781399500869)

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Anita Wohlmann begins her book about metaphors aptly with a metaphor: metaphors can become worn-out, and this is when they are often seen as risky. But they can also be recycled, restored, and repaired – brought to new life: 'We can extend a metaphor's longevity, we can repair it, or we can repurpose it (if need be) and thereby – in the spirit of upcycling – discover for new value' (1). Wohlmann's metaphors of 'recycling' and 'upcycling' 'worn-out' metaphors are wonderful because they show how language is a technology or a tool that can be used in multiple ways – that is malleable, as Wohlmann argues throughout the book.

In this, Wohlmann joins a growing number of medical humanities scholars and writers who are optimistic about the possibilities of language – and more specifically about the possibilities of figurative language like metaphors – to capture complex experiences of illness and the social conditions surrounding them. Since Susan Sontag's *llness as Metaphor* (1978), literary scholars and cultural critics have tended to focus on the problematic ways our experiences and understanding of illness are shaped by metaphoric language. Sontag's worry was that metaphors tend to distort experiences of illness, and this led her to the famous statement according to which 'the most truthful way of regarding illness – and the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking' (3). Like Sontag, Wohlmann does acknowledge – together with the other writers she studies – the dangerous side of metaphors when it comes to illness. For example, the culturally dominant metaphor of 'illness as a fight' can be harmful in many ways if, as Wohlmann's list shows, it: 'justifies brutality and extreme measures in the treatment of illness; its martial associations can be intimidating; it considers the body (and its illness) an enemy, thus

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supporting a problematic body–mind duality; and it suggests only one desirable outcome (victory) and associates losing the fight or capitulating with failure and humiliation' (1-2).

However, in *Metaphor in Illness Writing* Wohlmann focuses on authors, including Sontag, who have used metaphors creatively and insightfully in their writing: to construct vivid, complex and self-reflexive portrayals of illness. Exploring the illness narratives, memoirs and essays by Arthur Frank, Sontag, Audre Lorde, Anatole Broyard, David Foster Wallace, and others, Wohlmann shows how common illness metaphors like 'illness as a fight' or 'illness as a journey' can be questioned, elaborated, extended and combined with other metaphors so that their meanings change, and they can create new insights about illness.

Part of Wohlmann's important and timely project is to challenge binary assumptions about metaphors: that metaphors like 'illness as a fight' are necessarily either familiarizing or defamiliarizing, empowering or disempowering, prescriptive or descriptive, harmful or healing: 'Rather than following this line of thinking, I propose that we consider metaphor as a flexible agent that can move between these poles' (19). What is needed instead, Wohlmann argues, is 'metaphor literacy': 'A more capacious understanding of the varied usability of metaphors and a method for a critical and mindful engagement with metaphor' (58).

One of the main questions of *Metaphor in Illness Writing* is then: how can knowledge about metaphors offer tools for patients and healthcare professionals to better understand experiences of illness? Here Wohlmann joins other scholars for whom the main method of literary research, close reading, is a practice that can be extended into the real world. Like in narrative medicine, close reading – close attention to the details of a text – can be used in healthcare to enhance medical professionals' skills in listening stories about illness. In Wohlmann's case, close reading is repurposed to create understanding about the ways metaphors work: how they affect our thinking about illness and care. As such, Wohlmann's book offers a response to Sontag and shows how to surpass the 'dangers' of metaphors.

Thinking about how metaphors work in the world and the effects they create, Wohlmann draws especially from Paul Ricœur's work, particularly *La Métaphor vive* (1975, transl. *The Rule of Metaphor*). According to Ricœur, metaphor is in constant tension between what 'is' and what 'is not', and this tension helps to create the main effect of metaphor: a new vision of reality. This way metaphors can be revelatory, creative and innovative. They can push us to see phenomena like illness in new ways.

In addition to Ricœur's emphasis on tension, Wohlmann explores how metaphors create comparisons between the things they put in connection with each another: a

metaphor invites us to ask, for example, in what ways are 'illness' (the target) and 'fight' (the source) or 'illness' (the target) and 'journey' (the source) similar. This comparison aspect of metaphors is commonly acknowledged, but it is also part of why metaphors can become dangerous. As Wohlmann shows throughout her analyses, metaphors risk erasing difference and imposing sameness where there isn't any. However, she also reminds us of the constructed nature of the 'similarity': 'metaphors do not proclaim a similarity or sameness; they extend an invitation, namely to 'see as' […]. In other words, metaphor does not mirror a resemblance between two ideas but establishes, or invites us to establish, that resemblance' (13-14). There is thus a continuous tension between sameness and difference which should be acknowledged. Likewise, Wohlmann shows how metaphors oscillate between conveying affects and larger structures of meaning: on the one hand, there is the 'lyric, sensory quality of metaphor'; on the other hand, there are the stories (or what Wohlmann calls 'mini-narratives' or 'narrative scenarios') evoked by metaphors (19).

Throughout the book, Wohlmann discusses the entanglements of narrative and metaphor: how metaphors carry out narratives (mini-narratives or narratives scenarios); how metaphors are embedded in narratives; and how narrative techniques and structures can modify the meanings of metaphors. Wohlmann's analyses show especially how metaphors gain new meanings in different narrative contexts and demonstrate convincingly that narrative analysis, in addition to metaphor analysis, is needed in the close reading of metaphors.

However, occasionally the book relies on quite a narrow understanding of what 'narrative' is: narrative as coherence, linearity, and closure which excludes fragmentary and sensory experiences that metaphors are seemingly 'better' at conveying. Whereas Wohlmann systematically calls for a capacious view of metaphor, narrative form is occasionally seen as limiting. However, couldn't the same be said about narrative as what Wohlmann says about metaphor? That narratives are not either harmful or beneficial, limiting or complex, but they can move between these poles. And like metaphors, also narratives can be fragmentary, open-ended, focus on the present and convey sensory experiences, whereas Wohlmann occasionally connects these features only to metaphors (e.g. 5, 125; contra 50).

Wohlmann has chosen to study authors who continue to use the metaphor of 'illness as a fight', but do it 'self-reflexively and purposefully' (2). They 'combine it with other metaphors and stretch the metaphor until it fits their life stories, individual circumstances and world-views. […] The controversial fight metaphor, in their hands, constitutes a space for agency, resistance, self-knowledge, repair – even pleasure' (ibid.). Wohlmann shows how, for example, Arthur Frank 'draws out more and more

meanings' (51) of the fight metaphor as he talks about illness as 'wrestling', thus changing the meaning of the 'fight'. The same applies to Audre Lorde who reimagines and stretches the fight metaphor by evoking the image of 'Amazon warriors', female soldiers who, according to the myth, cut off their right breast to be better archers. The masculine meanings of war are undermined in Lorde's writing, and the fight becomes more complex: it's not just against illness, but against social and medical structures that oppress women and environmental conditions that cause cancer. In Susan Sontag's work, in turn, Wohlmann discovers contradictions when it comes to metaphors: on the one hand, the essayist advised against metaphoric thinking; on the other, she continued to use metaphors to convey her own experiences of illness. It becomes clear that Sontag was less binary in her opinions than is often thought.

In Anatole Broyard's and David Foster Wallace's works Wohlmann finds an abundance of metaphors. Both as if 'collect' metaphors: they show the multiplicity of possible illness metaphors, using them, abandoning some, and using some again. Whereas Broyard 'shares with his readers his personal collection of metaphors' (128), favoring '*quantity over quality*' (125), Wallace showcases different harmful and limiting metaphors, but ultimately makes them ironic: 'Irony here seems to function like yeast or baking soda: it makes a metaphor expand, soften and unfold' (152). Wohlmann's analysis shows how narrative strategies like irony can change the meaning of a metaphor.

Wohlmann's book reminds its readers that the way writers, patients, medical professionals and others use metaphors can vary greatly, and that context is everything. Instead of seeing metaphors in binary terms, Wohlmann urges readers to think about metaphors from different perspectives and in their different contexts. Wohlmann's book ends with instructions for a close reading of metaphors. Her five-step process, also modeled in the analyses, consists of 1) identifying an expression as a metaphor, 2) naming the salient features of the metaphor (the mappings between the source and the target domains), 3) evaluating the metaphor (for example, what the metaphor is trying to do or failing to do), 4) analyzing the (historical, cultural, and narrative) contexts of the metaphor, and 5) activating the generative potential of the metaphor. As such, *Metaphor in Illness Writing* offers concrete tools for fields like narrative medicine: it helps us to recognize the work that metaphors do in the world and challenge them when needed.

Works Cited

Sontag, Susan, *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978.