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The role of metaphor in compagnonnage

(*Le rôle de la métaphore dans le Compagnonnage*)

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Comments on this paper are welcome.

Résumé

Devenir compagnon implique plus que de l'habileté et de la connaissance de haut niveau dans un métier manuel. Le compagnon pense, se perçoit, perçoit son métier et le monde de la façon typique qui soutient son comportement adulte d'artisan très qualifié et qui le motive dans ses rôles de mari, de père et de citoyen. La formation compagnonnique entraîne le jeune homme dans un programme rigoureux d'éducation technique, générale et morale. J'utiliserai des publications officielles du compagnonnage et des entretiens avec des participants pour montrer que le programme immerge aussi le jeune dans un véritable océan de puissantes métaphores - le voyage , l'initiation, le perfectionnement etc. Je proposerai que ces métaphores amènent le jeune, souvent d'une manière subliminale, à façonner ses idées au sujet de lui-même, des autres, du métier etc., de manière à constituer le compagnon polyvalent. Je terminerai avec des comparaisons entre le milieu des métaphores dans le compagnonnage et le milieu parallèle probable dans les lycées français et américains, et je considérerai brièvement de quelle façon les métaphores pourraient être mieux utilisées là pour rehausser le développement personnel et intellectuel des jeunes d'origine marginale.

The role of metaphor in compagnonnage

Most people in this room agree, I suspect, that schools in the Western world are in trouble, particularly at the secondary level and in the university undergraduate years. Problems include achievement levels, student alienation, unequal opportunity, antiquated curricula, teacher morale, facilities, dissatisfied parents, funding, etc. Research by American anthropologists of education, among others, has documented these problems, at both the micro- and macro- levels. These studies also show, as I interpret them, that even the most ambitious efforts to improve schools are at best “tinkering” within a Western, or perhaps a “world”, (Anderson-Levitt 2001) cultural paradigm : the classroom, with an adult teacher directing a group of desk-bound students, who listen to the instructor and manipulate books, paper, and writing instruments.

Few people, anthropologists included, I am sorry to say, ask whether the paradigm itself could be the root cause of most of the difficulties. Is it possible that schools and teachers, as we know them, are essentially incapable of engaging the attention and energy of most of the young people of post-technological society? Is it likely that they can educate sufficiently at best only a minority? Are we in truth blaming victims for the difficulties they encounter? Are dramatically altered forms of education required for the new kinds of young persons produced by contemporary and emerging circumstances of family life, neighborhood organization, sexual mores, mass media, ethnic relations, changing labor market, etc.?

Systematic answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this paper. But my views of what they might be are implied in the decision that Dorothy and I made, about six years ago, to devote a major portion of our post-retirement lives to the study of the French apprenticeship and education program, compagnonnage. Compagnonnage explicitly repudiates the dominant paradigm of schooling for adolescents and youth, and replaces it with a very different set of experiences, based on a very different model. In our view, it succeeds---professionally and academically and psychologically---with many youths for whom the collège and lycée have been, at best, marginally productive.

Some people here already know about compagnonnage. For those who do not, we have condensed the main facts----not an easy thing to do!----into the one-page summary that we passed out (and now include as an appendix to this paper). The slides we have shown provide further glimpses into compagnonnage life. But I need to emphasize here a few key aspects, to make the rest of this paper more immediately accessible. (For more complete accounts, see Guédez 1994 and Hautin and Biller 2000.)

Most boys enter compagnonnage as apprentis at 16 or 17, after finishing college and accepting full-time jobs, paid at half the minimum wage, in the specific trade each has chosen. They remain apprentices for two, sometimes three, years. They live in compagnonnage maisons, or residential colleges----two of every eight weeks during apprenticeship, full-time after they become aspirants. To enter aspirance, they must demonstrate personal worthiness and preliminary competence in their métier, in part by producing a simple chef-d'oeuvre (special project), and undergoing the rite d'adoption. As aspirants, they change jobs, cities, and maisons every six or twelve months: this is their Tour de France. To become compagnons, they must show increasing competence in the métier during a further five year period, complete a more complex chef-d'oeuvre, and undergo the more serious rite de réception. During the next two or more years, many new compagnons serve as maîtres de stage, teaching and mentoring the apprentices, or in other full-time posts in the organization.

I have claimed that the *compagnonnage* program succeeds with those who participate in it. I will support this claim only infernally in this paper. *Compagnonnage* apprentices qualify for the initial Government certificate in their métier faster, and in greater proportions, than boys in mainstream training programs. During aspirance and later, they obtain intermediate and advanced level certificates, and the Baccalauréat Professionnel, in proportions greater than workers in other training programs. We observe them entering as demoralized refugees from the collèges and lycées; they emerge as skilled and knowledgeable craftsmen and, they tell us in interviews, with enhanced self-confidence and direction, even if they complete only the two years of apprenticeship.

Though France's unemployment rate now hovers around 8% or 9%, virtually all *compagnonnage* youths have job or (later) business opportunities in their métier, starting in the apprentice years. Many of them gradually perceive that the academic subjects they earlier questioned can help them become better craftsmen, businessmen, and citizens, and apply themselves to enriching their general cultural background. Their social skills are in advance of their years and often of their individual social class origins. They have well-developed ideas about professional ethics and family and civic life. One of the pleasures of studying *compagnonnage* is the chance it affords to witness the enthusiastic engagement of virtually every boy in nearly all aspects of the demanding *compagnonnage* program. They certainly do not behave like most other early twenty-first century students and youth!

Dorothy and I have given a series of papers in which we have tried to explain how specific aspects of *compagnonnage* formation contribute to this impressive engagement of participants. We have focused on its similarities to a "rite de passage", particularly in its rituals of initiation and changes of residence (Herzog 1989 and Herzog 1992); its other uses of ritual and myth (Herzog 1991b; Herzog and Herzog 1997); the identity-repair it accomplishes for hand- and spatially-oriented boys damaged by the academicism of collège and lycée (Herzog and Herzog 1998; Herzog and Herzog 1999a); and the techniques of affective arousal employed by the *maîtres-de-stage*, who we feel are the most important of the young mentors whom we call "near-peers" (Herzog 1991a; Herzog and Herzog 1999b).

In each of these and other aspects of *compagnonnage* training, we now see something else going on, about which I will talk today. This is the interpenetration everywhere of a powerful figurative language, more specifically sets of metaphors, which evoke and regulate the youths' feeling and thinking about themselves, their ongoing lives, and their futures.

Metaphor is a feature of human communication with which until now only a handful of rather anthropologists has concerned themselves. I became attracted to it by reading some of the work of anthropologist, James Fernandez, my friend and college classmate, who most prominently cites Edmonson (1971), Levi-Strauss (1966), and Nisbet (1968) as precursors. Initially I wasn't altogether sure, perhaps like some listeners and readers, what metaphor is. "Flowery language", maybe. Fernandez acknowledges that metaphor seems a "soft and woolly" concept (1986:6), more appropriate to literary criticism or to theological exegesis than to anthropology.

But after reading Jim's papers more closely, and consulting the dictionary, I began to feel that I better understood the concept. A metaphor is a usage in which a word or phrase that ordinarily specifies one thing is employed to invoke or emphasize an aspect of another, as in the "flowery" part of the expression, "flowery language". A bit of discourse does not contain flowers, but by pairing the term with "language", connotations of color and brightness and liveliness are evoked, and a more satisfying notion of a particular style of talking or writing is achieved. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Tenth Edition) defines metaphor as "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one

kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (as in *drowning in money*"); more loosely, this dictionary defines metaphor as "figurative language".

Suddenly, to paraphrase Jim paraphrasing Molière, I realized that we had been listening to metaphors (maybe "drowning" in them!) all the years we had been working with the compagnons. An epiphany!

I began to see that many of the terms used by compagnons to describe their program are, in fact, metaphors, or at least figurative language. They inevitably employ a non-literal idiom. Even the word, "compagnon", is evocative. Its everyday meaning in the artisanal trades is "journeyman", or "skilled craftsman", but when a member of the organization applies it to someone else or to himself, he conjures an additional signification, that of "companion" or "comrade", which signification springs from its Latin root meaning a person who breaks bread or eats with another. Thus "compagnon" denotes more for a member or a recruit than a competent artisan; it suggests friendship, solidarity, and eating together, each of which is a compagnonnage value and tradition.

Another example : compagnons do not like to describe their program as a variety of "education", because the word reminds them of "l'Éducation nationale" and the boredom, passivity, and shame associated with that for them. Anyway, their goals are not to teach school subjects but to promote "épanouissement", ("blooming") of the self, and "la transmission d'un homme à l'autre" of artisanal skills, morality, and tradition. In describing the learning that takes place in the program, the compagnons say that a youth "se perfectionne" (meaning "improves himself", not "is improved by" someone else). We thus see that the compagnons use a metaphor of growth from the inside, of at least partially autonomous development, to explain the program. They avoid the image of "injection" and "deposit" implicit for them in the term, "education".

To become a compagnon after seven years, one does not simply demonstrate technical competence and theoretical knowledge in Government exams that are removed from real life. Rather, one executes a chef-d'oeuvre (a "major work"), as did the artisans and artists of old, that demonstrates one's personal qualities, artisanal skills, and knowledge. Further, the adults from whom a youth learns are not simply his bosses, co-workers, and teachers; even if they are only five or ten years; older they are his anciens: his elders, the custodians of the lore and morality of the trade's past and present.

La maison is the routine term for the compagnonnage residential college, with its dormitories, classrooms, workshops, and other living facilities. "Maison" normally means "house" or "home", of course; the compagnons describe the ideal atmosphere of a maison as family-like. In applying the term to the larger grouping the compagnons transform it into a semi-domestic unit, and arrange that a woman, called la mère (literally, "the mother") preside over it. During ritually and emotionally charged events, the phrase, "la mere", is extended to the maison itself, and the collectivity of its residents becomes la communauté. Note also that an apprentice does not simply become an aspirant during the ritual that marks this transition; rather, he is "adopted" (adopté) into as a provisional member of this new family. Similarly, he does not simply "become" a compagnon: he is "received" (reçu) as a full-fledged new member. In essence, during his formation he takes up membership in a second family, without weakening his ties to the first.

In each maison, one finds La Règle ("the Code") posted prominently in a common area. Superficially, this elegantly printed notice sets forth the commonsense rules and customs by which residents should conduct themselves. The older youths in the maison refer occasional miscreants to this compilation. But the term and the placard also symbolize a larger and more philosophical bundle of compagnonnage values, from which

the rules are derived, like respect for others, work as a good in itself, and politeness, to which all participants strive to adhere. The newcomer must mainly derive these abstractions for himself, for except in La Règle they are not routinely or explicitly enunciated.

These are a few examples of the metaphors, or figurative language, that the trainees and their mentors encounter and manipulate, many of them every day. However, the most complex network surrounds what may be the centerpiece of the program, le Tour de France. Objectively, the Tour is a five-year series of jobs and living arrangements in French cities, during which the aspirant increases his artisanal competence, deepens his knowledge of French culture, geography, and economics, hones his self-knowledge and interpersonal skills, and emerges a highly skilled craftsman and citizen. But the phrase suggests much more : a toughening exposure to some of the difficult components of adult life, an opportunity to live apart from one's parents, a comprehensive sampling of all that France has to offer, a wandering upon the highways and byways of France, maybe even the Grand Tour that wealthy and aristocratic young men enjoyed in previous centuries. Much more than just moving about! Many apprentices and young aspirants long for their personal Tour to begin, and it is often described in romantic terms by prospective, current, and past participants.

Today I want to look at examples of “compagnonnage talk” about the Tour drawn from three pages of a brochure prepared by the compagnons for a Paris exposition, “D'un Siècle à l'Autre : le Compagnonnage du Devoir”, that closed earlier this year. (Les Compagnons du Devoir 2000: 23-24; 33). In these pages le Tour is most often referred to as “le voyage”, almost a synonym but probably more uplifting than the ordinary terms, like “changement de ville” (proceeding to a new house and job), “mouvement” (movement), “nouvelle embauche” (new job), etc., that are often used in the daily life of the maison. Le voyage, one reads, “permet un enrichissement sur le plan professionnel” and is “un moyen de découvrir la richesse du patrimoine du métier”. Thus, it does more than increase one's skills and knowledge, it ennobles and deepens one's professional competence, and it is a way of coming closer to one's predecessors in the practice of the métier.

“Le voyage” is also described in the brochure as “un passage nécessaire et un vecteur déterminant pour la construction de l'homme[,].....[et] la remise en cause de soi-même et l'abandon de ces certitudes; c'est l'école de l'humilité”. In the first phrase, it is presented as promoting character development in a way analogous to building a house or a piece of furniture. In the second, it is projected as a venue for self-reflection and self-questioning, almost as a personal court of inquiry; daringly, the negative image of “school” is invoked, but in association with an exotic un-school-like curriculum. Le voyage (or le Tour) also “oblige chacun à se refaire”, and to put himself “sur le chemin de l'excellence”. The first of these expressions again uses the construction metaphor, while the second, for those who know a bit of compagnonnage history, recalls the Tour in previous centuries---- long distances, bad weather, robbers, uncertain welcomes, etc. (This last image may contribute to the idea, still held by some compagnons, that only men can cope with the rigors of compagnonnage.) Le Tour (or le voyage) can accomplish these things because it is “éprouvé par les cinq sens”, i.e., it is direct experience of the real world, especially the world of work, and not “le voyage virtuel, celui des livres, de la télévision, celui qu'on nous raconte, celui qu'on imagine.....”, the pretend and artificial excursions permitted by books, the media, etc.

Thus do les anciens of compagnonnage, who wrote or edited the brochure, promote the Tour via an assemblage of metaphors, many of them particularly provocative for prospective young artisans. There is evidence that these usages do “capture” the youths' imagination (to resort to metaphor), because figurative language appears not only in

brochures but also intrudes into the thinking and speech of participants. Most simply, they talk a lot with each other about their next, or their previous, jobs and maisons on the Tour. Sometimes they are interested in the kind of work within the métier that is available in a city, sometimes in the cultural life, sometimes in the ambiance of the maison itself. Images of enrichment, connection to the past, construction of manhood and reconstruction of the self, extraordinary schooling, a difficult road, etc., also recur when participants try to explain the program to an outsider, such as the interviewer/ethnographer.

For example, one aspirant mécanicien, talking to me, referred to compagnonnage as an “adventure”, adding, “I didn’t have any problems with that”. An older toolmaker declared that “Compagnonnage gives a sense to life..... [T]he goal is to be at your own best, and we try to make others progress with us”. Another aspirant in the same trade said, “Compagnonnage is a way to become a man, to learn how to manage one’s life..... [W]e develop our personality”. Compagnonnage is “by far the best training to get”, said an apprentice carpenter. “Elsewhere we have to work..... Here we work because we like it”. A métallier apprentice acknowledged that “It’s tiring. We have short nights. It’s tough to adapt oneself to this kind of life”. But an aspirant mechanic was not atypical in saying that, “What we accomplish within eight months..... is done within two years in a lycée. So we have to work a lot”. Most of the metaphors of the Exposition brochure, or the meanings they project, echo in these easily elicitable statements.

“All right!” you say, “The compagnons speak in metaphors. They have a quaint argot, and using it correctly makes one a member of the in-group. So what?” Agreed : the figurative language helps them affiliate. But it does much more. To explain what I mean, I will return to Jim Fernandez’ provocative ideas.

To understand what metaphors do requires that we look at figurative talk in an unconventional way. Commonsensically we think of language as a tool that allows the individual both to send and to receive thoughts and feelings. But to see how metaphor works in compagnonnage, we need to recognize that language (especially metaphor) can also influence and shape a user’s feelings and thoughts, beyond the communicative act itself.

“Metaphor”, Fernandez says, “accomplishes an unaccustomed linking of domains” (1986:12). Formally, it is “a strategic predication upon an inchoate pronoun (an I, a you, a we, a they, [an it]) which makes a movement [of or by the pronoun] and leads to performance” (1986:8). Metaphors, by means of the uncommon associations they propose, forge unexpected connections among affects and concepts, on the one hand, and real people, things, and other feelings, on the other. “Metaphors”, Fernandez argues, “can be adopted by actors.....[T]he metaphoric assertions men make about themselves or about others influence their behavior” (1986:7). “A metaphor thrust upon us often enough as a model can become impelling” (1986:20) although “[s]uch persistence in the application of metaphors does not often occur, so that persuasion does not usually pass over into performance” (1986:20). But if a number of metaphors is deployed both frequently and in a mutually reinforcing pattern, as seems to occur in compagnonnage, the impact of the set of them may be considerable.

Through what intermediate processes do metaphors influence behavior? This dynamic has not been much studied. To explain it, Fernandez resorts to his own metaphor, one that we have already heard. A metaphor, he says, involves the projection of an idea or feeling onto someone or something which induces “a movement and leads to a performance” (1986:8). The “movement” here is figurative; it is first a presumed a change in how a person feels about or sees himself or another, and then it is a change, slight or great, in that person’s behavior.

Thus, for a *compagnon* to predicate “*compagnon*” upon another artisan may lead him to feel positive toward that worker and perhaps stimulate affiliative behavior. Referring to oneself as a “*compagnon*” may stimulate warm memories of events such as meals with *copains* (buddies) around the table in the maison. To identify a complicated construction as a “*chef-d’oeuvre*” probably mobilizes feelings of respect for it and heightened awareness of standards. To become aware that the “*la transmission*” of the carpenter’s trade requires one to enact techniques used by the builders of the cathedrals may lead one to feel connected with history and more committed to mastering traditional skills.

I suggest that responses such as these, provoked by *compagnonnage* metaphors, lead to actions congruent with them : engagement in the training program despite its difficulty, behavior appropriate to being a member of *la communauté*, staying active in the association as a *compagnon*, observing high standards in one’s work, etc. The trainees may be said to live in a “*metaphor-rich environment*”, with which they interact often and intensively. Their feelings and thoughts change, briefly and minutely as they experience specific expressions, but cumulatively and perhaps permanently as they encounter the same and related images over time. In sum, their altered feelings and thoughts affect their actions and behavior: they remain in the program, they learn their *métier* well, they achieve a rounded general education, and they become active and productive *compagnons*, citizens, and parents.

It would be difficult to maintain that the cultural environments of most secondary schools and undergraduate colleges in the US and Western Europe are as “rich” in metaphors as that of *compagnonnage*. I am unable to remember many from my own school and “university” days. We were often admonished to “work hard” so that we would “get into college” (or graduate school). We sang songs about “the College upon the Hill” and on certain occasions we were required to dress formally, “like gentlemen”. The “liberal arts” and “scholarship” were held out as ideals, but resonated very slightly with most of us, because we had little understanding of them. There was a language of effort, achievement, and even camaraderie on the athletic fields and in student activities, but the expressions employed there did not connect with the supposed major goals of the institutions. In summary, there was little motivating language in school and college to help us want to become better educated persons.

In previous decades, I propose, the metaphoric environment of secondary schools and colleges did not matter as much. Students worked at learning because they believed in its economic and social pay-offs, or because they feared more proximate penalties if they did not achieve at least minimally. But now society has developed such that many youths do not see the subsequent advantages to them of school learning, nor are they as worried, rightly or wrongly, about what will happen if they do not collect their basic certificates of worthiness, e.g., the high school diploma. The need for metaphors that engage is probably greater now, but their frequency in the academic community is, if anything, lower.

Anthropologists have only recently taken seriously the potential of metaphors to influence feelings, perceptions, and behavior, but athletic coaches, religious leaders, politicians, dictators, and the advertising industry are aware of their power and deliberately employ often powerful figures of speech towards their ends. I suggest that well-chosen sets of metaphors may be essential, along with changes of residence, near peers, real world experience, etc., in any new paradigm of education developed for the post-technological era. Settings like *compagnonnage*, where metaphors are already in use, are valuable laboratories for understanding their potential for good and for ill.

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