

# The Performance of Ritual Metaphors

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Finally a few examples may be given of cases in which the use of descriptive terms for certain concepts or the metaphorical use of terms has led to peculiar views or customs. . . . More convincing are examples taken from the use of metaphorical terms in poetry, which in rituals are taken literally, and are made the basis of certain rites. I am inclined to believe, for example, that the frequently occurring image of the *devouring of wealth* has a close relation to the detailed form of the winter ritual among the Indians of the North Pacific coast. . . .

FRANZ BOAS (1911)

This insight offered to anthropology by Franz Boas has largely lain fallow in the sixty years since. Kenneth Burke, however, in his wide-ranging and insatiable inquiry into man and all his works, has made that insight central in his task. And he would appear to have carried it far beyond the bounds of religious ceremony. He writes:

Indeed as the documents of science pile up, are we not coming to see that whole works of scientific research, even entire schools, are hardly

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more than the patient repetition, in all its ramifications, of a fertile metaphor? Thus we have at different eras in history, considered man as the son of God, as an animal, as a political and economic brick, as a machine, each such metaphor, and a hundred others, serving as the cue for an unending line of data and generalizations. (1954:95)

Of course as Burke has worked out his theories of "dramatism"—for his any discussion of human affairs is dramatic criticism—the symbolic actions singled out again and again take the form of ancient collective ritual. In Burke's analysis ritual dramas emerge in the most contemporary and mundane literary materials. However widely he searches for central metaphors, therefore, the problem of their relation to ritual remains.

In anthropological theory we recognize a progression of central metaphors: the growth metaphor of evolutionism, Frazier's "struggle over succession," the Durkheimian mechanical-organic typology, the Kroeberian superorganic, the diffusionist "pebble in a pool." Histories of anthropological theory are usually silent on these central metaphors although literary anthropologists influenced by Burke (Hymen 1959) are quick to point them out. While we may resist seeing in them a whole system of thought (Pepper 1942) we can recognize their fertility. A new metaphor does plant before us a new frame of reference which is felt to be more apt and to make better sense of the materials than previous perspectives.

If an awareness of metaphor is important because of its presence as an organizing element in inquiry, one is equally moved to its study by the frequency of figures of speech in natural discourse. Unless we give some explanation of how metaphor—the essential figure of speech—operates, we risk making what Garfinkle calls "judgmental dopes" out of our informants. We risk ignoring in our intellections the comprehension they have of their situation as a result of more subtle "sign functions." He points out: "Available theories have many important things to say about such sign functions as marks and indicators but they are silent on such overwhelmingly more common features as glosses, synecdoche, documented representation, euphemism, irony and double entendre." (Garfinkle 1967:71)

If Garfinkle finds such devices of representation common in the natural discourse of the mass society in which he works, how much more common must they be in the societies studied by anthropologists which are proverbially reliant upon indirection and analogy rather than upon direct analysis. Although an interest in the relation of metaphor to ritual is nothing new a theory of that relationship is in need of elaboration. It is proposed here that metaphors provide organizing images which ritual action puts into effect. This ritualization of metaphor

enables the pronouns participating in ritual to undergo apt integrations and transformations in their experience. The study of ritual is the study of the structure of associations brought into play by metaphoric predications upon pronouns.

### METAPHORIC PREDICATION AND METAPHORIC MOVEMENT

How can one give an account of metaphoric statements? They are slippery and appear to be something of a swindle. In what way is one to be critical of them. . . affirm or deny their use by reference to the distinctive features of the event or object to which they are applied? Metaphorical statements—our leader is a foxy grandpa—"cannot be corrected by reference to proper usage nor by the way things turn out" (McClosky 1964:216). In what way can one say of them that they are right or wrong? They can only be shown to be inappropriate or inept. Can inquiry satisfactorily probe anyone's sense of ineptness or propriety? It is difficult to specify the set of rules or principles of distribution by which the decision to associate our leader and a foxy grandpa can be anticipated. That decision rests upon a multitude of experiences with these words in contexts which overlap in some respects but contrast in others.

Rather than a grammatical definition of metaphor, I will propose, to guide us, a two-part semantic definition. A metaphor is (1) a device of representation by which a new meaning is learned (Von Steenburgh 1965:678) and (2) a strategic predication upon an inchoate pronoun (an I, a you, a we, a they) which makes a movement and leads to performance.

First, a metaphor is a predication to some subject that changes the meaning of that subject. Thus George is a muffin. Metaphoric usage is to be contrasted with literal usage in the sense that when we make a literal predication about some subject we do not really learn anything new about it. We merely identify it by applying a name to it according to its characteristics (the distinctive features it gives evidence of) at some level of the domain to which it belongs. Thus George is an animal, George is a man, George is an adult, George is a father etc.

Any subject or any set of subjects is literally assigned a name (a predicate) according to a set of characteristics which ordinarily characterize it in common parlance in relation to the domain in which it belongs. Any subject or any set of subjects is assigned a metaphoric predicate according to a set of characteristics which do not literally characterize it, except at a very high level of abstraction. This can be

illustrated with Venn diagrams (Figure 1). In that sense metaphor makes a false attribution and it is in that sense that we learn something new about the subject. And it is also in that sense that Aristotle defined metaphor as the extension of a name from that to which it usually belongs to some other object.

It is sometimes said that literal predication singles out the essential or important features of the subject while metaphoric predication singles out striking but not essential or important features (McClosky 1964:219). This may be the case by reference to logical rules of classification and denotation but it does not hold when we have connotation in mind. It is in the realm of connotation primarily that metaphoric predication teaches us something new. What we are taught there, I mean to point out, may be essential and very important. Although Locke, from the logical point of view (*Essay on Human Understanding*), criticizes such eloquent and artificial invention as metaphor obtains for "insinuating wrong ideas and moving the passions," it is precisely this insinuation and this movement which are behaviorally of greatest interest.

The fact that there is movement in our understanding, that we do learn something new in metaphor, is well recognized by Wheelwright who speaks of that imaginative process of outreaching (epiphor) and combining (diaphor) that characterizes the metaphoric process. Wheelwright (1962) makes a sharp distinction between epiphor—the extension of meaning by unusual comparison—(Life is a dream) and diaphor—the creation of new meaning by juxtaposition—"The Emperor of Ice-Cream"). This is not easily borne out by analysis, however, for metaphor generally combines both processes. Wheelwright's emphasis upon the etymology of the term—*meta* (change), *phora* (motion)—

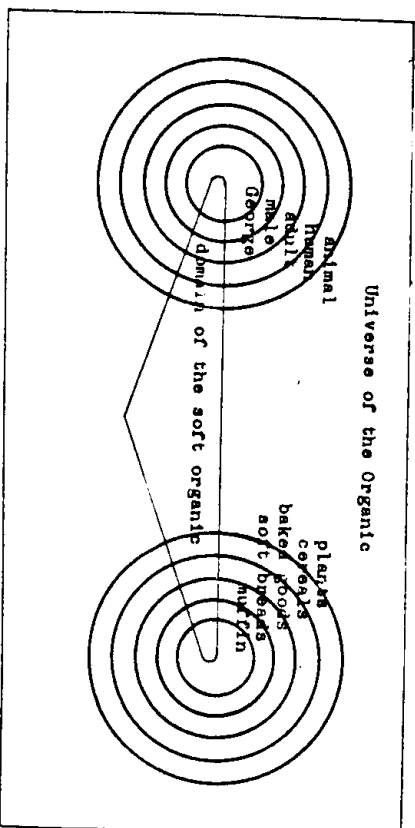


FIGURE 1

hence change in motion, captures, however, the dynamic to be emphasized. Indeed the term "vehicle," emphasized in the humanities for the metaphorical predicate, expresses the dynamic as well.

It is necessary to distinguish varieties of metaphor. The distinction is to be made first according to the relationship of the metaphorical predicate to its subject. As Aristotle advises, "To adorn, borrow metaphor from things superior; to disparage, borrow from things inferior." Metaphor will thus vary as it adorns or disparages its subject, and this is fundamental. But metaphor as vehicle must also be distinguished according to the clarity with which the subject is held in mind. Thus, if the subject is held clearly in mind, metaphorical comment has a rather different effect than when the subject is vaguely conceived. Here metaphor accomplishes a notable illumination of the obscure and inchoate. This difference has been made in terms of perspective metaphor (my arm, clearly conceived, is a lever) and prescinding metaphor (hate, obscurely conceived, is a smoldering fire) (Van Steenburgh 1965). In general, the semantic movement accomplished by metaphor is from the abstract, and inchoate in the subject to the more concrete, ostensive and easily graspable in the metaphorical predicate. Thus "mercy droppeth as a gentle rain from heaven." The gentle rain gives to the abstract and vaguely conceived "mercy" a concreteness that literal definition is hopeless to achieve. Metaphor obtains in such cases what has been well called by T. S. Eliot an "objective correlative" of what is subjectively inchoate in perception and reflection.

Metaphors, like language generally, can serve a variety of functions: informative, expressive, declarative, directive, etc. They can be put forth in an attempt to bring additional information to bear on a subject where logical processes of superordination or subordination seem inadequate. They can serve merely to express the speaker's feelings vis-à-vis the subject or to declare his intentions vis-à-vis the subject, or, in an indirect way, to give directions to the subject. The metaphors to be discussed here, in varying degrees, all these uses but their particular use approximates the last in that they give directions. We will call them performative metaphors because, as we shall see, they bring about actions appropriate to their realization. They imply performance.

There are many distinctions to be made in figures of speech. We will remark on one only: the distinction between analogue or structural metaphors (Black 1962:222) and textual metaphors (Berggren 1962-63).<sup>1</sup> The difference hinges upon the principle of association, the rule

1. Both Black (1962) and Berggren (1963) make finer distinctions in the varieties of these metaphors than we feel it necessary to make here. For example, Black distinguishes among scale models, analogic models, mathematical models. He also prefers the term *archetype* to metaphor probably because of the association of metaphor exclusively with poetics.

by which there is assimilation of metaphorical predication to its subject. In the case of structural or analogic metaphor, a metaphor is assigned to its subject on the basis of some isomorphic similar structure or pattern of relationships. Thus we say the *branch* of the stream, we use *tree* diagrams in logic, and we speak of the *mechanical* relationship of self-sufficient parts in traditional societies and the *organic* relationship of mutually dependent cells in bureaucratic societies. Black warns with good reason that "identity of structure is compatible with the widest variety of content—hence the possibilities for construction of analogic models are endless. . . the risks of fallacious inference from inevitable irrelevancies and distortions in the model are present in aggravated measure" (1962:223).

By textual metaphor one means that metaphor in which the assimilation made is on the basis of similarity in feeling tone—glowering clouds, a brooding landscape, a dyspeptic bureaucracy. It is, of course, the intent of science to eradicate mere textual or emotional association and capitalize as much as possible on the analogic mode of metaphor attempting to develop more systematic precision in the structural analogy by experimental verification. [The textual/structural distinction is roughly similar to that made between internal and external metaphors in Part I. (eds.)]

In the analogic mode of metaphorical reasoning, however, there may often be emotional reasons behind the assimilation. Take the Durkheimian mechanical and organic metaphors. As has been frequently pointed out, they have a different emotional weight—the former an objectivity, an exteriority, a detachment, the other a subjectivity, an interiority, an attachment. These metaphors move by a kind of "principle of compensation." One can speculate that the assignment of the mechanical metaphor to traditional societies objectifies societies in which the emotional subjectivity of kinship is the characteristic feature. On the other hand, the assignment of the organic metaphor to the impersonal and rational bureaucratic societies subjectifies them and gives them an interiority they do not, in fact, possess. In our analysis of metaphorical usage we stress the importance of the emotional movement accomplished by the metaphor whether textual or analogic in emphasis.

We can now identify the kernel metaphorical statement with which we will be preoccupied: the inchoate subject and metaphorical predicate out of which, by a series of transformations, we see arise the thick and complex surface structure of cult ritual. One need not apologize for employing a modish transformational metaphor for it fits the phenomena very well. Kernel metaphorical statements involve pronouns as the inchoate subjects (tenors, continuous terms) and any of a virtually limitless range of nominal attributes as the metaphorical predicates (vehicles, discontinuous terms). The general movement of kernel meta-

phor is from the abstract and inchoate in the subject to the concrete and ostensive in the predicate. What is more abstract and inchoate and in need of predication than a pronoun? Personal experience and social life cry out that we predicate some identity upon the I, the you, the he, the she, the they, the it. These are the "generalized others" which social experience singles out for us but does not meaningfully identify in any particular way.

Hence:

I am a lion or a parrot.

He is a mouse or a muffin or the King of Kings!

We are friendly giants a bit clumsy in our paternalism.

They are calculating machines who know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

She is a common scold.

It is an organism which was born and will die.

From all these kernel metaphorical statements, we learn something new about the subject in the sense in which we have above discussed learning as movement.

When faced, in short, with the inchoate pronoun men have several options. Most reasonably they can appeal to the principal domain to which the subject belongs and offer a predicate definition by superordination within that domain. He is an investment officer. He is a banker. He is a businessman. He is a father. He is an adult. He is a homo sapiens. We see here immediately that men in social life belong to a number of domains and hence in qualifying the inchoate pronoun we must always choose one domain or another of his activity. Of course, we learn something by the very choice of domains and by ordination within it but not in the sense that we learn something by the metaphorical choice of a domain to which the subject does not legitimately belong and within which he does not legitimately act. The other alternative in the pursuit of a forceful and clear predication to the inchoate pronoun is the tautological one upon which great works of the imagination, in pursuit of ultimate definitions, often end, viz. *The Divine Comedy*. The subject, perhaps out of phenomenological despair that no predicate is not in some sense metaphorical, is simply reiterated, neither confirmed nor denied in the predicate: I am I, he is he, it is itness, etc. The subject like Dante finds himself, itself, themselves, looking into a mirror. In fact, this tautology of the mirror exists in the cult to be examined.<sup>2</sup> But this alternative, an aspect perhaps of the mythological

2. The initiates, sometimes in Bwiti and almost always in the sister cult of Mliri, eat the alkaloid *choga* (*Tuberenthes choga*) while looking into a mirror painted

motif of eternal return, is not so interesting as the metaphorical predicate which entails, as I now want to point out, ritual performance.

#### A RITUAL PROGRESS: BWITI

I would like to demonstrate the operation of kernel metaphorical statements in relationship to the Fang reformative cult of Bwiti (Fernandez 1964, 1965, 1966). This cult offers one of the most complex liturgical structures that we know of among African religious movements, which must be today numbered in the many thousands (Sundkler 1960; Barrett 1968).<sup>3</sup> It is correspondingly richer in metaphor. But metaphor is an organizing element in all these cult movements and I have elsewhere attempted to give an account of these metaphors—the militant metaphor of Christian soldiering in the *Apostles Revelation Society* in Ghana, the pastoral metaphor of the bull that crashes in the kraal, in the *Church of God in Christ* in Natal, South Africa, the sylvan metaphor of the parrot's egg in *Bwiti* itself, and the atmospheric metaphor of the circumambient holy wind (or ghost) in Christianity Celeste in Dahomey (Fernandez 1966, 1967, 1969, 1970).

The cult of Bwiti in the Gabon Republic is polymorphous with more than six sub-branches. The data presented here are taken from the *Asumegé Ening* (New Life) branch which appeared after the Second World War in the Region of the Estuaire and in the early sixties was principally located in Kango, Medoune, and Oyem districts. But Bwiti itself is much older. It appears about the time of the First World War as a result of the contact between the Fang and the southern Gabonese people in the lumber camps of the Gabon estuary and the lower Ogoowe. The Fang adapted their own ancestor cult Bieri (then failing) to Bwiti, the more aesthetically compelling ancestor cult of the southern Cabonese people, notably the Mitsogo and the Baloumbo. At its inception Bwiti represented the syncretism of two northwest Bantu ancestor cults. More recently there has been considerable syncretization of Christian elements.

In the *Asumegé Ening* branch of Bwiti we can identify the following distribution of ceremonial scenes (Frake 1964) in the all night cere-

with abstract designs. After some time, under the influence of the narcotic and the ritual, they "see" their ancestor come out of the ground (actually their own face reflected). It is an essential first step of initiation. But it is a crucial step for, visually, the I is transformed into the other by a simple tautology.

3. This judgment is based on field work in ten religious movements in various parts of Africa in 1959-60 and 1965-66. See, for example, the ritual parsimony that characterizes the *Apostles Revelation Society* in Ghana (Fernandez 1970).

mony held once a week. The distinctions may be made according to the Bwiti's own ritual vocabulary.

#### Introduction

1. *Minkin*: ceremonies of entrance into the chapel and invitation to the ancestors. Intermittent, beginning at 3:00 p.m.
2. *Njimba*: ceremonies of personal prayer, preparation, and foregathering. Held en masse in a hut outside the chapel, 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

#### Zen Ngombi Part I (Road of the Cult Harp)

3. *Zen Abiale*: the ceremonies of the birth of the spirit into the after life (syncretized to the birth of Christ). From early evening until midnight. Interspersed with *obango*—vertiginous dances in which the spirit is shaken free from the body.
4. *Nkobo Akymge*: "evangile," the ceremonies of final reunion with the ancestors. Final and most direct and powerful prayer to the supernatural. Direction of the "miraculous word" to the membership from the cult leader—*nima na kombo*. Includes a small *minkin* in which the membership exits to go out into the forest on narrow pre-cut trails in order to invite in any lingering ancestor spirits. Midnight.

#### Zen Ngombi Part II (Road of the Cross)

5. *Zen Atou*: the ceremonies of the death of the spirit from after life into this life (syncretized to the death of Christ). From midnight to first light, interspersed with *obango*.

#### Conclusion

6. *Minkin*: ceremonies of exit from the chapel and farewell to the ancestors. First light until sunrise.
7. *Njimba*: ceremonies of euphoric aftergathering of the membership for ritual food and relaxed conversation. 8:00 a.m.

The scenario is not absolutely fixed in any cult house, and scene development tends to vary with season and with the leaders responsible for the particular scene. Some leaders are more given to creative and unscheduled ceremonial elaboration than others. Now that a Christian calendar has been adopted, the particular ceremonies are even more susceptible to shift in spiritual and practical focus. But we may define four major categories of the scene:

1. *Minkin*: ceremonies (songs and dances) of entrance and exit.
2. *Njimba*: ceremonies (song and prayers) of group cohesion, intercommunication, and appeal to the powers.
3. *Zen Ngombi*: ceremonies (songs and dances) particularly celebrating the primordial experiences of the individual (at the level of

body tissue, events of satisfaction and depletion) and of his culture (at the level of the mythological events of creation and dispersion). Generally divided into two sub-scenes as life processes or death processes are being celebrated (*zen abiale, zen atou*), and according to whether the key instrument is the soft cult harp, *ngombi*, or the intense drums, *obango*.

4. *Evangile*: ceremonies of communication of the "word" from the powers, and confirmation of the bonds of the spiritual community.

Although there may be some variation in the distribution of these scenes and in the arrangement of the more than two hundred songs and a dozen dances that appear as part of them, the general distribution shows us *minkin* and *njimba* embracing the road of the cult harp which themselves embrace the evangile as the nested and nuclear event of the evening.

Although there is considerable variation in the distribution of scenes within the total scenario, and particularly as we descend in level to the inspection of smaller and smaller segments of scenes (Pike 1967), nevertheless the distribution is not probabilistic and dependent solely upon the outcome of the accumulating series of scenes. "In acting as well as in speaking persons have an image of the pattern to be completed and make plans according" (Frake 1964:125). It is just this series of images that must be scrutinized if one is to understand the cult and have some modest foreknowledge of its necessary development. My view is that these images are contained in metaphors, which organize scene development in a fundamental way.

Let me then examine four metaphors which arise in Bwiti as members comment upon the evening's progress. We find them referring to various constellations of the ceremony as: here we are such and such, there he is such and such—*vyong dzi bi ne, eyong te e ne*. Four of the most recurrent predicates are:

- bi ne esamba*—We are a trading team (in file through the forest).  
*bi ne ayong da*—We are of one clan.  
*me ne (e ne) emucan mot*—I am (he is) the son of man (man child).  
*bi ne nlem mvoore*—We are one heart.

Although these metaphors emerge in liturgical commentary, one finds them running through cult life and providing a periodic familiarizing reinforcement, or leitmotif. Merely to identify them is not enough. We must (1) demonstrate their aptness and (2) show how, in performance, they accomplish those transformations of experience which is the prime function of religion.

First consider their aptness, for the fitness of ritual lies in the aptness

of metaphor, and it should be one main object of anthropological method to indicate the contexts by which metaphorical associations become appropriate or apt. It may be asked: is not aptness a function of purpose? Is not something apt or appropriate to a certain purpose? Bwiti participants articulate several purposes that bring them together for worship. Predominant among these are the desires to obtain surcease from the sorrows of village life, to obtain some sense of vitality in that life, and at the same time to obtain effective contact with the ancestral dead and the powers of the beyond. In fact, the purposes of the cult are not dogmatically, even clearly, formulated, and it is difficult to obtain consensus about them (Fernandez 1965). One may, abstracting from the evidence before us, say more accurately that the cult ceremonial is not explicitly regarded as a technique undertaken with a practical purpose in mind but is rather valued for certain kinds of affirmation it makes and inspirations it gives. And to understand these affirmations and inspirations—we may still wish to call them “purposes”—one must examine the metaphors themselves. For a very fundamental kind of purpose is declared in the very choice of these metaphors.

The metaphor of the *esamba* appears first in the transformations I want to consider. It is the metaphor that belongs typically to the *minikin*. The metaphor connects the cult members to a cohesive trading band marching with determination through the forest. Historically the main association of this term is that of the adventurous team of young men which collected rubber and ivory at the turn of the century and took it to the coast to exchange for trade goods. This group was characterized by high solidarity, the euphoria of hunting and gathering, and a rewarding trading relation with the colonial world. It was a group characterized by values and a sense of purpose which led to significant fulfillment. The aptness of this metaphor is readily understood when the goallessness, the lack of solidarity in village and kinship, and the high degree of ambivalence about the larger colonial world are grasped. For these conditions provide experience to which the metaphor was, and continues to be, a compensatory representation.

The second metaphor to emerge is that of *anyong da*, one clan. It is primarily the metaphor of the *nimba*. This may not seem like a metaphor but in fact it is, for the membership of Bwiti chapels is an association drawn from many clans and to a degree from several tribes. It is not properly described, by reference to the norms of Fang social structure, as one clan. During the *nimba* when the members sit together under the eye of the elders of the cult to hear individual prayers they say: We are one clan. Prayers are made at this time, incidentally, preceded by the reciting of genealogy, the “*pièce maîtresse*” of clan identification. We must keep in mind that clan relationships are much

degenerated in their claims on allegiance (this is reflected in the decline in knowledge of the genealogies). Since allegiance to the clan is virtually the same thing as allegiance to the ancestors, who are its guarantors, we understand the aptness of this metaphor. For the Bwiti cult is reacting to the kinds of individualism and opportunism which have undermined the clan and the ancestors, who symbolized its viability and the viability of all its members.

The third metaphor is *emwan mot*: child of man, or man child. In the process of the *zen ngombi* phase the members speak of themselves and particularly of their leaders as *emwan mot*. This metaphor has a complex of associations, not the least of which may be a Christian one—in particular the reference to the Savior not only as the son of God but also as the son of man. In this metaphor, it seems to me, the Bwiti expresses several notions. First of all, the satisfactory spiritual experience can only be achieved by escaping from the contaminated (*ngol abe*—bad body) condition of adulthood where, it is said, sexuality and strife with one's brothers and peers burden down the spirit and prevent it from rising over to the “other side.” Efforts are made in ritual costume and in spatial arrangements in dance patterns to avoid the expression of sexual dimorphism and the direct contact between the sexes. The cooperative attitude toward all cult activities is insisted upon. Thus is the innocence of the child achieved in preparation for the passing over to the “other side” where the spirits exist in asexual harmony. Other associations make this an apt metaphor—for example, the notion that the younger the child the closer he is to the ancestors. The metaphor also aptly expresses that state of helplessness and search for aid which the cult members desire to impress upon the ancestors and the great gods. Finally by insisting on identifying themselves with the child of man they emphasize their corporeality—the primordial facts of birth, the intermediate conditions of organismic life, and the inevitability of death—which in all its aspects they both celebrate in worship and seek to pass beyond.

This last intention of the child of man metaphor is even more aptly conveyed in the metaphor of “one heartedness”—*nlem mwore*. This metaphor is affirmed at several points in the ceremony, first at midnight when the members, candles in hand, exit from the chapel in single file and move out into the forest to make final appeals to any ancestors that may be lingering there. As the members file back into the chapel they begin to spiral more and more tightly together until they form a compact mass with candles raised above their heads in such a manner as to form one flame. Here is “one heartedness,” a general object of the cult, most characteristically obtained.

Organic metaphors, the extension of the body image into secondary

