Imagery

THE LANGUAGE OF THE POEM is the language of particulars. Without it, poetry might still be wise, but it would surely be pallid. And thin. It is the detailed, sensory language incorporating images that gives the poem dash and tenderness. And authenticity. Poems are "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," said Marianne Moore.

How is it done? What is meant by "particulars?" What are images? How does this figurative language work?

Imagery means, generally, the representation of one thing by another thing. A statue is an image. When Robert Burns wrote, "O, my luve is like a red red rose," that rose is an image; Burns was using imagery. If Burns had written "My love is sweet, wild, wonderful, you would like her," he would have been using descriptive language, but no imagery. There is, in

the second sentence, no representative image of the beloved person.

Figurative language is another term for imagery. When we talk about figurative language, we mean that in the poem there is a figure—an image—that is, a concrete, nonliteral, informing representation of something. This "something" might be a person, a thing, or an abstraction. One could represent patience, for example, as a figure on a monument—a quality as patient as stone, in other words.

Usually the term is used when one of the specific devices of figurative language is meant—for example, a metaphor or simile, allusion or personification.* When we talk about "a figure of speech," we are talking about an instance of figurative language.

Such figures may be straightforward, like the red rose in Burns's poem. Or they may be as complicated as the figure in the concluding lines of William Butler Yeats's poem *The Second Coming:*

> And what *rough beast,*† its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

In addition, the poem must have a necessary quality of detail—enough to sustain the reader's passage into the imagined world of the poem. I call it the poem's texture. This is where the "particulars" come in.

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*These terms are defined in later sections of the chapter.
†Italics mine.

The Particulars and the Texture of the Poem

When you use the words "the apple" or "the peach" you are representing a *thing*. Neither is a very specific thing, yet both are visual things compared, for example, to the word "fruit," which is informational only and which the reader will understand, but from which no particular image can form.

If you drop the article and use the word alone—"apple" or "peach"—you are moving away from the direction of the particular and toward the abstract. Once again, the reader can visualize "the apple" or "an apple," but "apple" is only a word meaning any or all apples—it is not a thing. Thus it is unseeable, it vanishes from the realm of the imagined real. The world is full of sensory detail. The poem needs this sensory detail also.

When one writes "the last apple on the tree," or "the one small peach as pink as dawn," one is beginning to deal with particulars—to develop texture.

This is a good moment to read Elizabeth Bishop's poem *The Fish*. There are metaphors and similes in the poem, devices discussed later. Also there is texture—the poet gives the reader a plentitude of details concerning the fish, and this texture is vital to the poem. Such texture is vital to all poetry. It is what makes the poem an experience, something much more than mere statement.

The Fish

ELIZABETH BISHOP

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
—the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly—
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,

the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip—
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snapped
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

Couldn't Keats have noted the nightingale's song, and his thoughts about it, in a poem far briefer than his *Ode to a Nightingale?* But we would not have been given the texture of the poem—the atmosphere, the very particular details, in which we feel invited to sit with Keats in the garden and feel the song spindling over the fields, its deliciousness and melancholy, and all the questions thereby evoked.

I can think of no part of the poem that is more essential than this matter of its texture. How much of it is needed depends on many factors, of course, on the pace of the poem, and on how good you are. Whitman, in a single line, can establish the reader thoroughly in the place-where-the-poem-is:

> Over the sharp-peak'd farm house, with its scallop'd scum and slender shoots from the gutters, . . .
>
> (*Song of Myself,* section 33)

or:

> The shape of the step-ladder for the convicted and sentenced murderer, the murderer with haggard face and pinion'd arms, . . .
>
> (*Song of the Broad Axe,* section 10)

No, it does not take much, but it takes a sure eye and a capable hand to be forever noticing and writing down

such particulars. When reading Stanley Kunitz's poem *The Round,* I think of the poet leaning closer and closer into the flowers, so that he sees not just how the light flowed over the honeybees, but how

> down blue-spiked veronica
> light flowed in rivulets
> over the humps of the honeybees; . . .

The poet must not only write the poem but must scrutinize the world intensely, or anyway that part of the world he or she has taken for subject. If the poem is thin, it is likely so not because the poet does not know enough words, but because he or she has not stood long enough among the flowers—has not seen them in any fresh, exciting, and valid way.

Figurative Language

The language of the poem is also the language of one thing compared to another thing.

In figurative language, a familiar thing is linked to an unknown thing, as a key, to unlock the mystery, or some part of the mystery, of the thing that is unknown.

In every instance *something has to be known initially* in order for the linkage and the informing quality of the comparison to work.

An image is frequently a pictorial phrase, which delineates or captures some essence of a known thing. In the metaphoric device, this essence is then extended so that it applies to an unknown thing. The chosen

The Round

STANLEY KUNITZ

Light splashed this morning
on the shell-pink anemones
swaying on their tall stems;
down blue-spiked veronica
light flowed in rivulets
over the humps of the honeybees;
this morning I saw light kiss
the silk of the roses
in their second flowering,
my late bloomers
flushed with their brandy.
A curious gladness shook me.

So I have shut the doors of my house,
so I have trudged downstairs to my cell,
so I am sitting in semi-dark
hunched over my desk
with nothing for a view
to tempt me
but a bloated compost heap,
steamy old stinkpile,
under my window;
and I pick my notebook up
and I start to read aloud
the still-wet words I scribbled
on the blotted page:
"Light splashed . . ."

I can scarcely wait till tomorrow
when a new life begins for me,
as it does each day,
as it does each day.

phrase is believed to be suitable—that is, we have a faith that the poet will have chosen something suitable—both to the known and to the unknown thing. This transfer of some quality of the known to the unknown is like a beam of light; we "see" (that is, we understand) something about the unknown in the light of the known.

> Love like a burning city in the breast.
> (Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Fatal Interview,* XXVI)

> O to break loose, like the chinook
> salmon jumping and falling back, . . .
> (Robert Lowell, *Waking Early Sunday Morning*)

Additionally, such an image can be used to link one known thing to another known thing in order to help us "see" (physically see) something more sharply and memorably:

> The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
> Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
> (Robert Frost, *Once by the Pacific*)

Simile

The *simile* uses the words "like" or "as" in its construction. Thus the three illustrations just given are all similes. One thing is "like" another thing, or one thing does something "as" another thing does it. The simile is an explicit, stated comparison.

. . . the child's cry opens like a knife-blade.
(Donald Hall, *Twelve Seasons*)

I wandered lonely as a cloud
(William Wordsworth, *I Wandered Lonely . . .*)

When the minted gold in the vault smiles like the
night-watchman's daughter, . . .
(Walt Whitman, *A Song for Occupations,* #6)

Metaphor

The *metaphor* is an implicit rather than an explicit comparison. It does not use the words "like" or "as" in its construction. The two things compared often seem very different, and the linkage often surprises and delights as well as it enlightens. Donald Hall says "The new metaphor is a miracle, like the creation of life."*

Little boys lie still, awake,
Wondering, wondering,
Delicate little boxes of dust.
(James Wright, *The Undermining of the Defense Economy*)

And she balanced in the delight of her thought,
A wren, happy, tail into the wind,

**The Pleasures of Poetry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 23.

Her song trembling the twigs and small branches.
(Theodore Roethke, *Elegy for Jane*)

When a comparison of two things generally is repeated and extended throughout a poem, with repeated instances of imagery, it is called an *extended metaphor.* When the comparison is particularly unusual or fanciful, it may be called a *conceit.*

Personification

Personification is the term used when one gives a physical characteristic or innate quality of animation to something that is inanimate, or to an abstraction. James Wright's lines—"I bowed my head, and heard the sea far off / Washing its hands"—contain a personification.* The last two lines of the Emily Dickinson stanza quoted earlier, on page 41—"It was not Night, for all the Bells / Put out their Tongues, for Noon"—is another example.

Here is still another:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the
window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the
window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the
evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,

*From *At the Slackening of the Tide.*

Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from
chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

(T. S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*)

Personification is an enlivening and joyful device. The challenge, of course, is to do it well. What you say about the abstraction or inanimate object must make sense of some sort—note how all the movements of the fog are horizontal, and how the pace of the movements keeps changing—all quite foglike. Though each movement is precise, and impossible, it is, in some wild magical way, possible to imagine it. And, a delight to imagine it. Simply to have trees wave, or waves dance, will not do. Better no personification than bad or foolish personification.

Allusion

An *allusion* is a reference to something that belongs properly to a world beyond the specific sphere of the poem. Often the reference comes from an historical or a cultural context, but not necessarily. Its use is to deepen the definition of or to extend the quality of something in the poem. Example: referring to William Blake's poem *The Sunflower* or to van Gogh's paintings of sunflowers would deepen and extend a perception of "any" sunflower growing in a field. Through the allusion, the values of literature and art are linked to the casual flower; through the allusion they shed their own intrinsic and valuable light upon it.

Universal Images

We experience the physical world around us through our five senses. Through our imagination and our intelligence, we recall, organize, conceptualize, and meditate. What we meditate upon is never shapeless or filled with alien emotion—it is filled with all the precise earthly things that we have ever encountered and all of our responses to them. The task of the meditation is to put disorder into order. No one could think, without first living among things. No one would need to think, without the initial profusion of perceptual experience.

Since we live in one world, and each of us is given the same five senses, and each of us has evolved on the same road out of the forest and the jungle, we all share a universal fund of perceptions. This common fund includes personal experiences and events that are likely to occur within the span of each lifetime; they touch upon community life, social life, spiritual life. Within this fund are perceptions so ancient, dramatic, and constant that they have been, over the centuries, mythologized. They have been inexorably bound up in each of us with certain reliable responses.

I am speaking of such archetypal concepts as the ocean as mother, the sun as a symbol of health and hope, the return of spring as resurrection, the bird as a symbol of the spirit, the lion as an emblem of courage, the rose as an example of ephemeral beauty—concepts

that link some object or action of the natural world on the one hand, and our all but preordained response to it on the other.

These days many poets live in cities, or at least in suburbs, and the natural world grows ever more distant from our everyday lives. Most people, in fact, live in cities, and therefore most readers are not necessarily very familiar with the natural world. And yet the natural world has always been the great warehouse of symbolic imagery. Poetry is one of the ancient arts, and it began, as did all the fine arts, within the original wilderness of the earth. Also, it began through the process of seeing, and feeling, and hearing, and smelling, and touching, and then remembering—I mean *remembering in words*—what these perceptual experiences were like, while trying to describe the endless invisible fears and desires of our inner lives. The poet used the actual, known event or experience to elucidate the inner, invisible experience—or, in other words, the poet used figurative language, relying for those figures on the natural world.

Certainly imagery can be gleaned from the industrial world—what do Blake's "dark Satanic Mills,"* for example, owe to the natural world? The city can be, and has been, the source of firm poetic description, and imagery too. But the natural world is the old river that runs through everything, and I think poets will forever fish along its shores.

Additionally, it is obvious that the literature of our

*From *And Did Those Feet.*

world cannot be read—*felt* as well as understood—without a familiarity with the natural world. The reader without perceptual experience with the natural processes is locked out of the poetry of our world. What would Yeats's "rough beast" mean to such a reader? Or the "red red rose" of Burns? Indeed, what would Romeo's amazed outcry

> "It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!—"

mean to a reader who is without an intimate feeling for the way, every morning, the light rises and blazes against the darkness?

Literature is not just words, neither is it just ideas. It is a formal construct mirroring all of life, reporting it, questioning it. And the power of poetry comes from both mental inquiry and figurative language—the very mud and leaves of the world. Without this mud and leaves—and fish and roses and honeybees—the poem would be as dull as a mumble. Without figurative language we could have no literature. A *body* of literature, as it is called.

Some Cautions

There are no rules about using imagery. Certainly it enlivens and deepens the poem. It is a source of delight. It makes the poem more meaningful—more of an experience. It is powerful stuff.

How much one uses it is a matter of taste. The writer would be wise to remember, however, just how much emotional excitement it can create. The poem that, all

along its line of endeavor, pauses to give out "jolts" of imagery may end up like a carnival ride: the reader has been lurched, and has laughed—has been all but whiplashed—but has gotten nowhere. In the shed electricity of too much imagery the purpose of the ride—and a sense of arrival—may be lost.

There is also the question of imagery that is fit and imagery that may be unfit. This too is a matter of taste. Poetry is a serious business; literature is the apparatus through which the world tries to keep intact its important ideas and feelings. It is joyful, and funny too sometimes, but it is neither facile nor poisonous. If you are not sure your image is appropriate, don't use it. Imagery that is inappropriate, or excessive, or self-indulgent, is offensive.

Figurative language can give shape to the difficult and the painful. It can make visible and "felt" that which is invisible and "unfeelable." Imagery, more than anything else, can take us out of our own existence and let us stand in the condition of another instance, or another life. It can make the subject of the poem, whatever it is, as intimate as honey—or ashes—in the mouth. Use it responsibly.

Revision

WHAT YOU ARE FIRST able to write on the page, whether the writing comes easily or with difficulty, is not likely to be close to a finished poem. If it has arrived without much effort, so much the better; if it was written with great toil, that does not matter either. What matters is that you consider what you have on the page as an unfinished piece of work that now requires your best conscious and patient appraisal.

One of the difficult tasks of rewriting is to separate yourself sufficiently from the origins of the poem—your own personal connections to it. Without this separation, it is hard for the writer to judge whether the written piece has all the information it needs—the details, after all, are so vivid in your own mind. On the other hand, because of this very sense of ownership, the poem is often burdened with a variety of "true" but unhelpful details.

Poems begin in experience, but poems are not in