

IMAGE AND METAPHOR

"Show, Don't Tell" is the motto of many a creative writing teacher (and program), and at the heart of that dictum is the primacy of the image, the "mental picture" our mind sees when we read about something that

has an analogue in the real world. Interestingly, as Kristie Fleckenstein points out, while we can disconnect image from language—“we do this every night in our dreams”—without language, “we cannot do anything with those dreams except experience them. Imagistic *is* logic lodges us in the moment. To be tugged out of the present, to be known as anything other than life as it is lived, we need the *as if* logic of language” (2003, 32). In short, the “embodied literacy” of an image is more complex than our intuitive grasp of imagery would initially suggest. There is a double logic at work: we “see” an image through the medium of language, yet it is difficult to locate just where that image exists: “An image is not something that we perceive; it is a process that we enact” (24).

Ontological and epistemological complications aside, the image has a long, impressive history throughout world literature. It would be impossible, for example, to conceive of East Asian poetry—of the haiku and senryu and tanka—without the image. In America, the continuing ascendancy of the image (as opposed to the abstraction) can be attributed in part to early-twentieth-century imagist poets like Ezra Pound, H. D., and William Carlos Williams. Of course, even at their most imagistic, these writers themselves never stuck *solely* to the image—language doesn’t work that way—but contemporary creative writers still retain their belief that a piece of work isn’t quite finished until the reader can see (or smell, taste, hear, and feel) whatever the writer is imagining.

M. H. Abrams identifies three main uses of the word imagery. In its narrowest sense, an image signifies “descriptions of visual objects and scenes” (1981, 79). This definition makes sense insofar as the word “image” refers to something that can only be recognized by the eye. In a much broader sense, imagery “(that is, ‘images’ taken collectively) is used to signify the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, by allusion, or in the analogues . . . used in its similes and metaphors” (78). In this context, just about any reference—visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, or kinesthetic—that is *not* an abstraction can be called an image.

However, Abrams argues that the most common usage of imagery refers specifically to figurative language, in particular metaphors and similes. As every creative writer knows, a metaphor says that one thing *is* another, while a simile merely suggests that one thing *is like* another. Simile is sometimes considered a poor cousin of metaphor, but for all practical purposes the two figures work the same rhetorical trick, comparing one unlike thing with another. Of course, similes and metaphors

are also the basis for clichés, figurative language that has become stale through overuse. To describe the relationship between the thing being referred to and the object of comparison, I. A. Richards coined the terms “tenor” and “vehicle” (1936). The tenor is the subject to which the metaphor is applied, and the vehicle is the metaphor itself. For example, in these lines by Indian poet Manohar Shetty, “The garden / Rake of her eyelashes,” eyelashes are the tenor and garden rake is the vehicle.

Metaphor from this vantage is more concerned with style (q.v.) than with conception. Yet because language is such an abstract and protean entity, it’s not surprising that we need concrete images to help us get a handle on it (to use an implied metaphor that has since become cliché). As Lakoff and Johnson point out in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), metaphor isn’t only a way to gloss and illustrate experience. Metaphors don’t simply reflect the way we look at the world, they can actually *shape* that process, and that shaping is intimately intertwined with how we remember the world: “Our memories are often, or perhaps always, metaphors: we have a particular picture in our minds of a house in our childhood which stands for many years of experience of family life; we sum up the dead in certain intense images from the past” (Anderson 1996, 59). Some linguists believe metaphor is ingrained in our thought processes, and usually we are not aware of the metaphors that direct our thoughts and actions. These basic metaphors permeate our language, Lakoff and Johnson believe, and when they are scrutinized they provide clues about the values and assumptions underlying our words. Meryl Altman argues that the benefit of Lakoff and Johnson’s approach “is not just that it is true, as you will discover if you try to write or say something without using any metaphors, but also that it enables us to observe the political operation of a particular metaphor on many levels at once, from the most elevated literary discourse to the most banal conversation, thus underlining the social importance of this inquiry” (1990, 500). Altman goes on to illustrate how the metaphors we use inevitably become a part of the power struggles we engage in.

Metaphors, then, don’t just occur *in* creative writing. Many writing teachers find metaphors are essential to talk *about* their teaching philosophies. Indeed, the history of writing instruction is a history of shifting metaphors, and many of the most influential approaches have been metaphorical. The recent history of writing instruction has yielded various attempts to describe the field by designating metaphors that show basic differences in teaching philosophy. As Philip Arrington puts it, “Today, our root-metaphor for composing is ‘process,’ but we argue

about the type of ‘process’ we are studying. If we examine them carefully, we find our arguments are really about the tropes we use to describe and explain that process” (1986, 326). Pointing out that we need to study carefully “the imagery embedded in our own professional language,” Ellen Strenski explores the implications of viewing writing instruction in terms of “the geopolitical model of conquest” or “the religious model of communities.” She believes we shouldn’t allow ourselves to invest too heavily in one or the other, and that we need to take teaching metaphors seriously: “Metaphors have consequences. They reflect and shape our attitudes and, in turn, determine our behavior” (1989, 137). In a series of articles, Barbara Tomlinson (1988) explores and classifies the range of metaphors used by published writers to explain their work. And Lad Tobin (1989) has argued that composition teachers should analyze student metaphors for writing, engaging students in dialogue about metaphors that direct their composing. Focusing attention on explicit (as opposed to implicit) metaphors by writers, whether generated by professionals or novices, can be a powerful teaching tool. Peter Elbow’s use of growing and cooking metaphors in *Writing without Teachers* (1973, 1998) introduced an influential set of analogies for composition and creative writing. Since then, writing textbooks have relied heavily on metaphor, and a number of articles and books, including Wendy Bishop’s *Working Words*, have examined, often critically, specific “root” metaphors about writing. So dominant are metaphors in discussions of rhetoric and writing instruction that Wayne Booth, one of the most important thinkers on the subject, jokes, “I have in fact extrapolated with my pocket calculator to the year 2039; at that point there will be more students of metaphor than people” (1978, 47).