

Open Form – If You Can Image It, You Can Do it

Here's an excerpt from an essay I wrote a long time ago on imagery:

Writing sharp, powerful imagery is therefore a matter of learning how to see, developing a vocabulary to express what one sees, and knowing how imagery contributes to the metaphor, rhythm, and meaning of verse. Imagery is the main claim of free verse to being poetry, and its importance cannot be overstated.

Pedantic, yes, but on point: the open form poem is usually dependant upon some level of imagery. Ever since Pound and Williams, the direct presentation of the object unmediated by sentiment or commentary has been the sand we've built our house on. That's too harsh- Victorian verse *was* flowery and sentimental, and Imagism and related movements were the desperately needed kick in the derriere. The 21st century open form poet must still learn how to turn the image, in order to avoid that hated boogiemán, Abstraction. Scared? You should be- abstraction is the vague, generalized language that desiccates every sentimental love poem, every "teen angst" poem about The Darkness of My Soul, every poem about the Goodness of God and His Smiling Angels, etc. Abstraction, unless handled very carefully (earned?) and usually paired with some imagery, gives the reader nothing to hold on to sensually or emotionally and comes across as a big blank which they are likely to skip. An image gives the reader a particular through which to approach the universal, and keeps the reader glued to the page. Of course, the image must be used for an effect and not merely a picture, but start right now getting yourself in the mindset in which you translate what you want to *say* into what you can *show*.

But first of all, what is an image? Rather than regale you with the various historical and critical definitions (which we will draw from anyway) I will attempt by observation to come up with one of our own. Here's a famous image:

"Jesus wept"

In two short words this contains a universe of meaning and hammers it home. But how, oh how? Well, the literal meaning of the event might be paraphrased as "Jesus was sad." A statement that X is in emotional state Y, a state we understand in the abstract, but we cannot connect with this particular sadness just from the words given. In the image we are given an action, weeping. An action that can be easily visualized- sobbing, tears collecting in his beard, red eyes, maybe a moan or two, etc. "Sad" we can maybe connect with a frown, but it conveys not nearly so much visually (and therefore emotionally) as "wept." And notice as well that it is even a very descriptive, powerful word for the action- we are not told that Jesus cried, boo-hooed, turned on the water works, etc. "Wept" alone gives us an image of gut-rocking sorrow. When we connect it to what we know about Jesus and the situation, the image of him weeping is so powerful it has moved people for 2000 years. So imagery, friends, *presents us with a scene, gives us something we can see, and, as we do in real life, react emotionally to what we see.*

One more example of imagery, one closer to how people usually think of it:

from "Spring and All," by William Carlos Williams

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast-a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines-

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15536>

We see immediately that this is a detailed, exact description of a landscape: its colors, shapes, textures, etc. We can easily see this scene, we have probably known an area like it. We inhabit this world, and what we see cannot fail to have an emotional connotation. Notice also the passage consists mostly of concrete nouns and concrete adjectives- indeed, some might consider it over-modified: "purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy" seems to pile on too much. Or it would, if this scene of cold desolation was not essential to the poem's meaning-from the **dead** land comes the Spring. The imagery here sets the tone against which the other imagery reacts:

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
One by one objects are defined-
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
entrance-Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken

This imagery dramatically presents the return to life. We see the grass unfurl, and no

abstraction (“Spring returned”) could have anything like the visceral impact of these lines. Notice Williams uses the choice abstraction, “stark dignity,” to buttress the weight of the image. We use imagery because we are sensual, specifically visual, creatures, and the road to a reader’s imagination (and through it heart) is paved with the concrete image.

One interesting side note is the difference between the mere concrete noun, for example “boy,” and the image. “Boy” is better than “person,” but could still look like any young human male, and is thus too vague to move us much. An image is *specific*: it picks out a particular boy sharply- “the mop-headed boy waiting hours for his mother.” We have here a brief but distinctive visual tag, “mop-headed,” and a situational, emotional context- where is this poor boy’s mother? *An image is a concrete noun supplied with a sensual element and an emotional context.*

Now, how to use imagery. Imagery actually has a number of functions inside of its previously stated major function. I will discuss three: strategic, tactical, and support. These involve how the image relates to the poem as a whole: the strategic image governs the body of the poem and is its main point. The tactical image occupies a few lines or a stanza and illustrates one idea within a poem. The support image compiles lists of images to make a point. Strategic and tactical images are often connected to dynamic metaphors, acting as vehicles for the comparison.

Here’s a strategic image:

from “The Great Figure,” by William Carlos Williams

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
(last line omitted to avoid getting sued)

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19475>

The firetruck moving through the rainy city is the entirety of the poem, its rhythm and intensity conveying the power of this magnificent machine, the riveting impact of this scene. That was the original interest of the Imagists, to achieve that pure taste of the object, to burn it into the brain. Once this image is digested we can wonder what it all means- mechanization, city-life, or even something mystical, a vision of a demon. For

our purposes here note that the whole poem is one cohesive image.

Here's a tactical image:

From "The Culture of Glass," by Thylia Moss

Thanksgiving 2004: I'm thankful for

Columbo's eye, Peter Falk's indivisible
from the other's vitreous dupe that he can pocket,
rub into, off of, and shine the crystal eyeball after
it subs in a game of table pool. Oh yeah!

<http://poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19080>

This is one of a series of images of glass objects: snow globes, aquariums, windows, etc, through which Moss explores the metaphoric associations of glass. Each image is considered separately from the other, illustrating one side of her theme. Tactical images can also be the parts of an extended metaphorical comparison, one of the stops in a developing idea. The image provides the metaphor sufficient concreteness to avoid losing the reader during the changes. For more on extended metaphors, see the next essay in this series.

The support image (you digging these military metaphors?) is different from the tactical image in that support images are plied onto to one idea, as opposed to shifting ideas. The most famous support image in modern poetry is from Allen Ginsberg's "Howl":

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry
fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the
starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the
supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of
cities contemplating jazz,
who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels
staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,
who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkan-
sas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war,
who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes
on the windows of the skull,
who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in
wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall,

<http://poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15308>

And so on for quite a while. The central idea is stated in the first line “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed...” and everything which follows is an example of those minds going to waste through drugs or poverty or insanity or Beatitude. The poem gets its effect from the sheer weight of these harrowing images, the exhausting emotional trip they take you on being the faintest glimmer of the experiences of these people. All of the images support one theme.

Imagery, ladies and gentlemen, is the means by which a poem grabs the reader’s imagination and uses it to slip into his feelings. Ground your poem in imagery, beginning perhaps with a list of items, places, events, etc. associated with your theme. Describe them in such a way that they connote your meaning and you will simultaneously achieve depth while avoiding abstraction. Apples ripe and red will fall from your tree, burst open and scatter their black seeds..... You get the picture. 😊