

Close-up: Imagery

Pascale Petit on how visualising the poem as a vessel can help to find the essence of its imagery

Photo: Kitty Sullivan



particulars are evoked the more the poem comes alive.

Poetic imagery is as various as poets. For me, image-making started with my training as a sculptor. "But what about the power of the image," the tutor used to insist, when I was not managing to file away all the seams from a bronze cast, or worse, if the clay original I'd moulded lacked a vigorous form. I expected sculpture to be a hard apprenticeship and it's the same with poems, which, like the plastic arts, are apprehended through the body's gates and need to be crafted to convince. I still feel I'm creating objects. I'm aware of the shape of the images, and think of each poem as a container, like Keats's Grecian urn around which the poem's pagan turn.

A poem that features one image as its vessel is 'Monarchs' by Sharon Olds, where she uses the metaphor of the migrating monarch butterfly to describe a tricky subject – her first sexual encounter. Here the metaphor is superimposed on a man, creating a double exposure. To carry off this unlikely pairing and suspend our disbelief her poem employs extra-precise colours and textures that deepen the impact:

...your touch was so light,
the delicate chapped scrape of an insect's
leg

across my breast. No one had ever
touched me before. I didn't know
enough to
open my legs, but felt your thighs,
feathered with red-gold hairs, opening
between my legs
like a pair of wings.

(*Selected Poems*, Cape, 2005)

Seeing the poem as a vessel can help to whittle the image to its essence. Is it cleanly wrought? Does it have integrity, with no extraneous parts? Is it smelted indelibly onto the page? I often recommend to budding poets that they play with imagery as if they are a sculptor creating an installation from found objects, and suggest they go on image and word hunts, collecting ideas and phrases in large notebooks, just as an artist does in a sketchbook, that they search for new sources of imagery beyond their comfort zones.

Although the visual sense is the most commonly used in poems, the other senses are also vivid tools and in my workshops I encourage poets to try to use them all. According to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, 1993) there are eight categories of mental imagery: visual (sight, brightness, clarity, colour, motion, pattern and form, depth of field, perspective, scale), hearing, smell, taste, touch

(and temperature, texture), the organic sense (awareness of heartbeat, pulse, breathing, digestion), the kinesthetic sense (awareness of muscle tension and movement, also gravity, mass and density) and that super-sense, synesthesia.

Some poems contain one unified image (whether visual or focused on another sense), others bring two or more disparate images together, while in others there's a collage. Poets may use imagery in a realist or impressionist way, be expressionist, or clash images in surreal mixes. André Breton defined surrealism as "the unexpected meeting, on a dissection table, of a sewing-machine and an umbrella", and a powerful example of this conflation of objects is in Moniza Alvi's poem, 'How the World Split in Two', with the central image of a split globe over which:

...a luminous tear
carried on the back of a beetle
went backwards and forwards
from one side to the other.

(*How the Stone Found its Voice*, Bloodaxe, 2005)

Her emblematic surrealism has a hallucinatory clarity but remains effortlessly natural, even though she is playing with scale through the restless

to-ing and fro-ing of that giant beetle. Echoing Alvi's precarious teardrop, and even more surreal, the Chinese poet Yang Lian's poem 'The Journey' (published in *Poetry Review*, 96:1), contains the dazzling image of "a scream locked in a raindrop". Yang's images are dense collages of strangely juxtaposed objects, but he considers his surrealism to be "deep reality" – imagery with roots, rather than a surrealism that might just be obscure or playful ornament. That large sound forever about to explode from its soundproof prison is as astounding as the sculptor Rebecca Horn's disemboweled piano in her installation 'Concert for Anarchy'.

Yang has stated in *Poetry London*, (issue 53): "all of my work in poetry can be seen as an effort to continue inventing from images". He isn't just conjuring the world but remaking it into a system of new symbols, creating his own richly furnished world. Ezra Pound profoundly influenced English-language poetry with the Imagist movement, which arose from his experience of Chinese, but judging from Yang's poetry, I suspect there is more for us to discover about image-making from the locked time bombs of those ancient pictorial characters.

● *Pascale Petit's latest collection is The Treekeeper's Tale (Seren, 2008).*