Introduction

What is an image? This is a question that philosophers and poets have asked themselves for thousands of years and have yet to definitively answer. The most widely used definition of an image these days is:**"...an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."** (Ezra Pound)

But this definition from Pound has a history to it. Before Pound outlined his definition, the image was seen very differently by most people. Therefore, the question "what is an image?" immediately breaks down into three fundamental parts:

1) Where do images come from?

2) Once an image is created, what is it?

3) How can an image function in a poem?

Before we answer these questions, we'll want to discuss some terms related to image so that we can use them in our answers.

Related Terms

Imagery
The category of which all images, as varied and lively as they are, fall into. "Imagery is best defined as the total sensory suggestion of poetry" (John Ciardi, World Book Dictionary def. of "Imagery.")

Imagination
1) The mental laboratory used for the creation of images and new ideas.
2) "n. A warehouse of facts, with poet and liar in joint ownership." (Ambrose Bierce, 60)
3) "Imagination is not, as its etymology would suggest, the faculty of forming images of reality; it is rather the faculty of forming images which go beyond reality, which sing reality." (Gaston Bachelard ,"On Poetic Imagination and Revery," 15)

Imagism
A school of poetry and poetics made popular by Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) in the early 20th century that focused on "direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective." H.D.'s "Sea Garden" (available at http://www.cichone.com/jlc/hd/hdpoet.html) is often seen as a good example of this style.

Concrete detail
A detail in a poem that has a basis in something "real" or tangible, not abstract or intellectual, based more in things than in thought.

Sensory detail
A detail that draws on any of the five senses. This is very often also a concrete detail.

Where do images come from?

The first question is one best left to psychologists and philosophers of language. Perhaps one of the most complete philosophical inquiries (and the one that seemed to create a dramatic break from classical philosophy), was that of Gaston Bachelard. Bachelard believed that the image originated straight out of human consciousness, from the very heart of being. Whereas before the image was seen merely as a representation of an object in the world, Bachelard believed that the image was its own object and that it could be experienced by a reader who allowed him or herself the opportunity to "dream" the image (the "revery" of reading poetry). The image then could not be intellectualized so much as experienced.

"So this is what happens at the moment of writing: the wave takes the shape of the fire. What is 'out there'

He even went so far as to claim that "Intellectual criticism of poetry will never lead to the center of where poetic images are formed." ("Poetic Imagination" 7) He believed that the image erupts from the mind of the poet— that the poet is not entirely in

control of the image and therefore is not seen as "causing" the image to come into being. Since the image has no "cause," the image has no past, and, subsequently, is an object in and of itself, separate from its maker and separate from the object it describes. He claims "[The image] becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being."

Bachelard is, of course, just one person's opinion on the matter, but his philosphy does hold true to the somewhat enigmatic and difficult-to-pin-down nature of the image. Where the image comes from is an issue that will probably never be solved, but suffice to say that if you approach its making as a mystery (and allow it to simply happen without too much intellectualizing) you will at least keep in line with one major aspect of its origin, that of the unknown.

moves inside. The poet becomes threshold."

(Larry Levis, "Some Notes on the Gazer Within")

What is an image?

The image is often seen, after it has been written, as being one of two things. It is either something that represents a thing in the "real" world, or it is seen as its own thing, divorced from the burden of representing anything other than itself. Again, it is the latter definition that has come into more common use. As many philosophers have recently shown, written language is more than simply representational. This means that the image, rather than being something that stands in for something else, is seen as something in and of itself; tied to the things of the world, but not burdened by "representing them directly".

Instead of staying in the abstract, let's look at an example of the formation of an image. We'll start with the following phrase:

> **The yellow lemon**

If image were merely a stand-in for something, then the phrase "The yellow lemon" would be an image. While we can perhaps see a lemon (albeit a redundant "yellow" one,) there is little evidence of a mind at work in this phrase. This particular lemon lacks certain characteristics that would convey that it is being truly experienced by a person, characteristics that more recent poets have defined more accurately.

Ezra Pound made perhaps the most widely used definition of image in the 20th century: "**An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.**" (Pound 143) In Pound's definition, the image is not just a stand in for something else; it is a putting-into-words of the emotional, intellectual and concrete stuff that we experience in any given moment. It is also important to note that an image in poetry, contrary to popular belief, is not simply visual. It can engage any of the senses. And, in fact, for it to *be* an image, it must engage at least one of the senses by using sensory detail.

"An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." (Ezra Pound)

Take, for example, the following image (we'll build on our previous example):

> **The sunlight in a lemon**
> **makes me wince.**

The words don't simply stand in for an absent object. There is suddenly a full experience in the words. It feels more human. There is something intellectual (one must convert the sunlight into vitamin C in order to know how the sunlight is involved), there is something sensual (taste, sour), and a bit of emotion (probably based on whether the reader, unlike the speaker in the poem, likes lemons). The instant of time is that of the speaker eating the lemon. The moment is frozen, so to speak, and given to the reader every time they read the image.

Poet Larry Levis felt this "freezing an instant of time" is what makes the image poignant. He said:

> The image draws on, comes out of, the "world of the senses" and, therefore, originates in a world that passes, that is passing, every moment. Could it be, then, that every image, as image, has this quality of poignancy and vulnerability since it occurs, and occurs so wholeheartedly, in time? (117)

It is the potential of losing the image that gives it its power. The job of the poet is to freeze the image as well as possible in a way that feels very real and human (concrete, intellectual and emotional). Taste a lemon and the sensation last for only a few seconds; write an image that conveys what it is like to eat a lemon and the sensation lives longer.

What are the uses of an image?

Once an image is created, there is often a need to place it in the context of a larger poem. While many aspects of an image may be endlessly debatable, this one rarely is: images are the concrete, gut-level part of a poem. And their function within a poem reflects that.

The poet Tony Hoagland often speaks about poems having many levels, or chakras, as he calls them. The heady and purely intellectual stuff of a poem he calls the "rhetorical". This is where questions are asked, statements are made and hypotheses are hypothesized. The second level is diction. This is where the voice of the poet comes through and doesn't concern our discussion too much here. The gut level is the image. The image, says Hoagland, comes in to fill the spaces made in the rhetorical moves of the poem. Say the poet states:

> **We find sunlight**
> **in the strangest places.**

Now there is nothing resembling an image here. This statement is purely intellectual, or, in Hoagland's language, "rhetorical". This statement serves to open space in the poem, allowing something more grounded and earthy to come in. Our image from earlier may work after this somehow, or many other images could follow.

The amount of space opened by a rhetorical statement or question reflects how much room there is to fill in a poem. A small question or statement may merit a simple, small image. A more grandiose rhetorical movement may call for long lists of images. Walt Whitman's lists are a good example; he posits something and then lists sometimes hundreds of variations on the theme.

This way of looking at the placement of an image into a poem is somewhat limiting and by no means exhaustive. The key to using images well in a poem is to remember that images tend to produce gut-level responses in our readers. They feel the most real. They do, ultimately, convey (in very short order) a complete human experience in words. And that is why a study of poetry almost always begins with the image. It is the backbone, the grounding rod, of the poem. Few other aspects of our language can boast such a strength.

***"[The literary image] is polyphonic because it is polysemantic. If meanings become too profuse, it can fall into word play. If it restricts itself to a single meaning, it can fall into didacticism. The true poet avoids both dangers."* (Gaston Bachelard)**

Exercises

Breadbasket of Images

1. Go outside and find 5 objects and describe them briefly in your notebook.
2. Take one of the five objects and add something that makes it "intellectual," something that shows that it is being observed by a thinking person. Do not just describe the thing; that is not image. Think of it as augmenting the object with your thoughts.
3. Take the same object and find a way to get something emotional into it. Again, raw description is not the key here; make it something that evokes an emotional response in you about the object.
4. Repeat with all five objects.

The Poet as Robber Baron

1. Find three images from three different poems that you really admire.
2. Replace the key element of each of the images with a new word. ie: if the key element of the image is "sun," try making it "whiffleball".
3. Now take the emotional and intellectual elements of the image and change them slightly to fit the word.
4. Using all three images, write a short poem where all three images come into play with each other.

Works Cited

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.

-- *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie.* Trans. Colette Gaudin. Dallas: Spring Publications, 1987.

Bierce, Ambrose. *The Devil's Dictionary*. Dover: New York, 1958.

Levis, Larry. *The Gazer Within.* Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 2001.

Pound, Ezra. "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," *Poetry* (Chicago) 1 [1913], pp. 198-206.

Handout content written by Sean Conrey, July 2002
HTML markup by Erin Karper

The following information must remain intact on every handout printed for distribution.

This page is located at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/general/gl_image.html

Copyright ©1995-2002 by OWL at Purdue University and Purdue University. All rights reserved. Use of this site, including printing and distributing our handouts, constitutes acceptance of our terms and conditions of fair use, available at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/fairuse.html.

To contact OWL, please visit our contact information page at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/contact.html to find the right person to call or email.