The Neuroscience of Poetry

Image, Simile, and Metaphor

“Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge.”
—Wordsworth
When we say the word... These are visual pictures.
Our first contact with reality is brought in by one of the senses. Our dreams are made of them. Memory is filled with them. Abstract thoughts are stripped of physical detail. Images are made of sense data. Sight, hearing & smell make up ¾ of The brain’s processing area. Images are concrete: bread, sunlight, blond. Thoughts are abstract: entity, reoccurrence, nutrition. Images in poems... Might arrive through any of the senses. Poets think in word images!!! It is by the senses we know we exist. Imagination works by rearranging images.
The poet is the professor of the five bodily senses.
—Lorca

—The shark
Glides white through the phosphorus sea.
—Melville

Somewhere between a peach and a prayer,
they taste of well water
and butterscotch and dried apples
and desert simooms and lust.
—Diane Ackerman

—that man, to be sitting near you,
knee to knee so close to you, hear your voice, your
cozy low laughter
—Sappho

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
—T. S. Eliot
Language Needs to be Concrete
to give poetry “muscle”

Abstract
“To pull away”

We mean you no harm
I have much to worry about
I often change my mind

Concrete
“To Grow together”

To you our swords have leaden points
O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife.
I am a feather to each wind that blows

—Shakespeare

She dresses sloppily

She wears her clothes as if they were thrown on by a pitchfork.

—Jonathan Swift

Showing is much livelier than telling. . .
What Does Poetry Want?

Poetry is immediately concerned with the concrete, the specific, the particular, not the general idea. Blake said, “To generalize is to be an idiot. Singular and Particular is the Foundation of the Sublime.”

“We think in generalities but we live in detail.”
—Whitehead

“The artist seeks the luminous detail. He does not comment.”
—Ezra Pound

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Ezra Pound
Haiku Knows How to Use Images

"The fallen blossom flies back to its branch:
A butterfly."

"The footsteps of the cat upon the snow:
plum-blossoms."

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals, on a wet, black bough."
The Imagists

Tenants of Imagist Poetry

I. Direct treatment of the “thing”
II. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute something.
III. Rhythm: compose to the musical phrase, not the metronome.

... favored precision of imagery and clear, sharp language
The Power of Images

Images allow layering of meanings.
Poems profess neither meanings or morals, though they may embody both.
Interpretation, as in life itself, is up to us.

Compare science vs. art

Image gives a kinetic sense to the observations.
It resonates or expands our experience

Tony Hoagland’s Layers of a Poem

1. Rhetorical: questions, statements, hypotheses
2. Diction: the voice of the poet
3. Image: the gut level of the poem, grounded, earthy, specific, concrete, particular...
NANTUCKET

Flowers through the window
lavender and yellow

changed by white curtains—
Smell of cleanliness—

Sunshine of late afternoon—
On the glass tray

a glass pitcher, the tumbler
turned down, by which

a key is lying—And the
immaculate white bed.

William Carlos Williams
Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

—Mary Oliver
Simile and Metaphor

Why bother?

Because poetry wants to go beyond the words.

You say the NAME. Now try to find the reality it names. Look at the moon in the sky. Not the one in the lake.
—Rumi

The poet’s preference for thinking in images is based on the way our body and mind put us in touch with the universe.

But there has to be more. . .

Next Step: Simile and Metaphor—comparing and relating images.

Expanding the Language
Let’s Unpack Simile and Metaphor
To Reveal Unexpected Likenesses Between Disparate Things

Simile: Latin word *like*
Metaphor: Greek word *transfer*

Metaphor has a closer connection than simile
My joy is like a river
My joy is a river
My joy, a river

We organize our thinking according to resemblances.

“The attic wasps went missing by like bullets. . .”
—Robert Frost

We need Economy of Words,
Precision of Thought.

“The old star-eaten blanket of the sky”
—T. E. Hulme

No man is an island
No man is like an island
Like draws the comparison but in certain circumstances it dilutes the assertive power of the image.
More Unpacking

Homer says Achilles “sprang at the foe as a lion.”

“as” or “like” makes it a simile. . .
Achilles takes on qualities of the lion.

Notice that the qualities of the lion Achilles assumes come from the reader’s imagination, not that of the writer, therefore the expansion of meaning is ours, and is particular to our own sensibilities. . .
we are partner to the creative process.

If he’d said, “Achilles, the lion, sprang at the foe. . .”
Achilles actually becomes the lion.
The wind, one brilliant day, called to my soul with an odor of jasmine.

'In return for the odor of my jasmine, I'd like all the odor of your roses.'

'I have no roses; all the flowers in my garden are dead.'

'Well then, I'll take the withered petals and the yellow leaves and the waters of the fountain.'

the wind left. And I wept. And I said to myself: 'What have you done with the garden that was entrusted to you?'

—Antonio Machado
And those little captains, the chickadees, swift to the feeder and swift away.

And the squirrels with their smoke-plume tails trailing digging in the leaves to bury or find buried—
I'm told they don't remember where they put things, that it's an activity of incessant discovery—
—Robert Hass

My life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
—Emily Dickinson
My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun (764)

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—
And now We hunt the Doe—
And every time I speak for Him
The Mountains straight reply—

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow—
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let it’s pleasure through—

And when at Night—Our good Day done—
I guard My Master’s Head—
’Tis better than the Eider Duck’s
Deep Pillow—to have shared—

To foe of His—I’m deadly foe—
None stir the second time—
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—
Or an emphatic Thumb—

Though I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die—

—Emily Dickinson
This need to compare is both psychological and intellectual.

How does metaphor work? First, on an intuitive level: We know exactly how Juliet is the sun. . .

then on a logical level.

But it’s not just about information. We feel pleasure discovering resemblances no one has noticed before.

then on an unconscious level

Nor does it stop there. For there is mystery to uncover by the expansion of language

We speak in metaphor every day. “What’s it like being in college?” “I feel like a dog.” “The table leg is broken.”
The Mouth of a River

The neck of a bottle

The long arm of the law

Mixmaster
Metaphors are Hidden Everywhere

Companion

Companion

Humility

Verdict

Speak

Truth
Hidden Metaphors of the Body
The Muscle of Metaphor

Metaphor is the “one thing that cannot be learned from others; it is also the sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dis-similars.”

—Aristotle

Things in this world have mysterious Informing links

Uncovers the invisible aspects

The capacity of poetry to speak to different people at different levels at the same time. . . . . . . . Is part of the magic.

Metaphors go deep

Body my house
my horse my hound
what will I do
when you are fallen
Where will I sleep
How will I ride
—May Swenson

God guard me from those thoughts men think
In the mind alone;
He that sings a lasting song
Thinks in a marrow bone.
—William Butler Yeats
METAPHORS
Sylvia Plath

I’m a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf’s big with its yeasty rising
Money’s new-minted in this fat purse.
I’m a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I’ve eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there’s no getting off.
The Body of My Brother

First it belonged to my mother
or seemed to
stuffed into her
like a foot in a sock.
Then it took care of itself
filling out
into home runs, high jumps.
There were times
it must have been afraid
hiding in a bunker
in South Viet Nam
having happen to it whatever it was
that makes bodies years later
leap out of bed in the middle of the night
not awake
sweating and shouting. . .
Last time I saw it
it was older than mine

thinned out
by too many cigarettes
and favors given.
Now they’ve taken it
from the hospital bed
where it gasped out its last punch line
and put it in a box
that no one will ever see again,
though we stand around it
observing gestures even death cannot remove:
head tilt, wry smile,
hands the same as my hands
crossed over his chest
as they never were in life,
a few pictures and mementos
scattered around it, as if
they were crumbs of a happy life.

—David Watts
THIS IS JUST TO SAY

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

(William Carlos Williams, 1934)