

Metaphor

Percy Shelley asserts in his *Defence of Poetry*, that the language of poetry, “is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension.” For Shelley the poet creates relations between things unrecognized before, and new metaphors create new thoughts and thus revitalize language.

The Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky in a similar insight suggests even more powerfully that poets awaken us from a false consciousness, a *habitualization* which “devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war.... And art(poetry) exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.” The routine of living and encountering the familiar to the point that we no longer truly see creates a desensitization to our world. The artist and especially the poet can defamiliarize and break through that blindness to awaken and refresh our experience with the world. It’s a bit like putting on corrective glasses for the first time after living without them-- a sudden clarity and unimagined brightness occurs.

The term metaphor comes from the Latin *metaphora*, which in turn derives from the Greek *metapherein*, meaning “to transfer.” Thus, a metaphor transfers the connotations or elements of one thing (or idea) to another. It is a transfer of energies, a mode of interpenetration, a matter of identity and difference.

Consider this short poem from Langston Hughes

The calm,
Cool face of the river
Asked me for a kiss.

The comparison of water to a face is certainly not a new metaphor, but in the turn of the metaphor in the final line to suggest a loving or even erotic personification is something new and unexpected. And beneath that unexpected we understand a bit deeper the possibility of a suicide rather than a baptism. Under this idea, the choice of the word “Cool” also assumes new meanings. Perhaps Shklovsky was on to something with his notion that poetic language “defamiliarizes.”

