

Book Review

Roland Bartel.
METAPHORS AND SYMBOLS: FORAYS INTO LANGUAGE.
 Urbana, Illinois: N.C.T.E., 1983.
 85 pp. \$6.50.

The author deals with these powerful expressions of imagery in a clear and simple manner, including the final chapter in which he discusses the humanizing aspects of metaphor and symbol, echoing William Carlos Williams' belief that we should be able "through metaphor to reconcile the people and the stones". (p.vii) This material, more theoretical than what precedes it, Bartel considers "the foundation for everything else."

The book is designed for the classroom teacher. It is North American in outlook and tone though firmly rooted in the tradition of the English language. What is new about the work is the form in which it is assembled and its up-to-date examples (including mention of Watergate). Bartel demystifies metaphor by placing its poetic use within the popular domain of riddles, slang, humour, cliché, proverbs and folk-lore. From this background the poetic uses stand out sharply without detracting from the author's adherence to the concept of unity in life and language.

Metaphor, Bartel says, is "any comparison that cannot be taken literally", and starting from this basic definition which ignores sub-divisions into simile and other figures of speech the author sets out to examine and compare differences between literal comparison and metaphor, and to distinguish between metaphor and symbol.

Each chapter arrives at definite conclusions which are summed up neatly and are followed by specific teaching suggestions. Examples of metaphors in popular usage are drawn from classical, biblical, European, and South American sources as well as from England and the United States. One rich fund - that of Australia and New Zealand - is lacking; but any teacher of English will find the book helpful and can easily add examples from particular locales where needed.

If the book has a fault it is one that teachers will probably welcome, that is that to a large extent it avoids

complexities. The word "ambiguity" is not used in relation to metaphor and, in stating the difference between metaphor and symbol, the author ignores the fact that although symbolic significance may be planned it often grows naturally out of metaphorical "pictures". Elizabeth Drew writes, "At their simplest both simile and metaphor are visual... we see more intensely". (Drew, 1959, p.53) But she goes on to say that metaphors work best when fused with mind or emotion. It is these strong metaphorical images that may become symbols, and the "use of symbols by modern poets has been all in the direction of complexity such as Blake's." The conclusion drawn from this is that we are often left with as much a sense of mystery as of clarity. This seems to me to be an essential ingredient of true poetry: the fact that metaphors and symbols relate a form that is forever fresh simply because it avoids a final summation, resists a precise definition of meaning. Bartel deliberately simplifies - and rightly so.

Bartel makes the important statement that "an indispensable quality of poetic metaphors is that they are inseparable from their context," yet, when quoting from Emily Dickinson, he goes little further than making lists (for example, of the many metaphors the poet uses for the sun). He does not show how these metaphors illuminate the central meanings and feelings of the poems they inhabit, or how Dickinson's metaphors are vehicles for the powerful spirit that informs them. Bartel helps us recognize and understand the significance of metaphor and symbol, but does not make available the manner in which they work.

However, this criticism is perhaps not valid when made of a book that is a clarification, and which sets out to assist the harassed teacher of English and succeeds in revealing many strategies that aid analysis without damaging poetic essence. The author has done us all a useful service in showing the presence of metaphor firmly embedded in language itself.

The inclusion of riddles and humour is especially useful as a lively aid to young explorers of language and poetry, encouraging them to have fun attempting to discover hidden meanings and perhaps solve one or two delphic mysteries. Left to itself, language moves from the concrete and particular to the abstract and general, from the literal to the metaphorical, in what Bartel calls "the enticement of metaphor" which is difficult to resist. This movement results inevitably in cliché, and it is the poet who revitalizes language by embodying fresh ways of seeing in fresh comparisons - in what Coleridge calls "the streamy nature of association", which blends together unusual similarities in things essentially different.

In his final chapter Bartel deals with the possibly unlimited creative potential of language. There are, he says, three major miracles associated with language: "that we are born with the capacity to learn and perfect language... that language literally created us" (that is, as George Steiner puts it, "Logos, or 'speaking into being of the universe'." Steiner, 1967, p.55) and

that language has "the incredible power... either to accelerate the development of our humanity or to destroy our humanity completely." Bartel continues to set out briefly the constructive and destructive powers of language, and to hint at the unity of language and life: "the perception of a unity underlying and relating all phenomena". (Day Lewis, 1947, p.34)

To sum up, this book is excellently compact, well-ordered and fundamentally sound, and one that this reader thinks should be on the shelves of each and every teacher of English.

Paddy Webb-Hearsey
McGill University

REFERENCES

- Day Lewis, C. *The Poetic Image*. (Cape, 1947).
Drew, Elizabeth. *Poetry: A Modern Guide to Its Understanding and Enjoyment*. (Dell Publishing Co., Inc. 1959).
Steiner, George. *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*. (Atheneum, 1967).