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CHAPTER SIX

SHOW, AND TELL.

WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR ROBOT, TOMMY?

THIS IS MY ROBOT.

IT'S GOT ONE OF THESE THINGS.

WHAT IS THAT, TOMMY?

WELL, UH... I LIKE IT 'CAUSE... 'CAUSE, UH...
IT'S THIS THING AND IF YOU PULL IT, IT GOES LIKE THIS.

KUNK!

AND... AND THEN YOU CAN DO THIS AND IT GOES UP AND YOU FLIP THIS.

I DID IT WRONG. WAIT.

LOOK, IT'S A AIRPLANE NOW!

THANK YOU, TOMMY.

WE ALL STARTED OUT LIKE THIS, DIDN'T WE? USING WORDS AND IMAGES INTERCHANGEABLY. IT DIDN'T REALLY MATTER WHICH WE USED, SO LONG AS IT WORKED.

IT'S CONSIDERED NORMAL IN THIS SOCIETY FOR CHILDREN TO COMBINE WORDS AND PICTURES, SO LONG AS THEY GROW OUT OF IT.
TRADITIONAL THINKING HAS LONG HELD THAT TRULY GREAT WORKS OF ART AND LITERATURE ARE ONLY POSSIBLE WHEN THE TWO ARE KEPT AT ARM’S LENGTH.

WORDS AND PICTURES TOGETHER ARE CONSIDERED, AT BEST, A DIVERSION FOR THE MASSES, AT WORST A PRODUCT OF CRASS COMMERCIALISM.

AS CHILDREN, OUR FIRST BOOKS HAD PICTURES GALORE AND VERY FEW WORDS BECAUSE THAT WAS “EASIER.”

THEN, AS WE GREW, WE WERE EXPECTED TO GRADUATE TO BOOKS WITH MUCH MORE TEXT AND ONLY OCCASIONAL PICTURES --

-- AND FINALLY TO ARRIVE AT “REAL” BOOKS -- THOSE WITH NO PICTURES AT ALL.

OR PERHAPS, AS IS SADLY THE CASE THESE DAYS, TO NO BOOKS AT ALL.
Meanwhile, words and **moving** pictures have half the world in thrall to their charms, but must struggle to make their potential understood.

Words and pictures are as popular as ever, but this widespread feeling that the combination is somehow base or simplistic has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The roots of this attitude run pretty deep.

As near as we can tell, pictures predate the written word by a large margin. Here are some big hits from the golden age of cave painting, about 15,000 years ago.

Some of this art shows considerable attention to detail, very much concerned with pictorial representation.

But others were very **iconic**, acting as symbols rather than pictures—more like a primitive language!
As mentioned in our last chapter, the earliest words were, in fact, stylized pictures.

As seen, most of these early words stayed close by their parents, the pictures.

It didn’t take long, though—relatively speaking—before ancient writing started to become more abstract.

Some written languages survive to this day, bearing traces of their ancient pictorial heritage.
BUT, IN TIME, MOST MODERN WRITING WOULD COME TO REPRESENT SOUND ONLY AND LOSE ANY LINGERING RESEMBLANCE TO THE VISIBLE WORLD.

Here's More! Order Today and receive FREE G--

WITH THE INVENTION OF PRINTING, THE WRITTEN WORD TOOK A GREAT LEAP FORWARD--

AND ALL OF HUMANITY WITH IT.

BUT WHERE HAD THE PICTURES ALL GONE?

WORDS AND PICTURES DID STILL COEXIST AT THIS STAGE IN WESTERN CIVILIZATION.*

BUT THOSE INSTANCES WERE BECOMING THE EXCEPTION, NOT THE RULE.

*IN ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS, FOR EXAMPLE.
MORE IMPORTANTLY, WHEN THEY WERE COMBINED, AS IN THIS GERMAN COMIC FROM THE 1400’s, WORDS AND PICTURES STAYED SEPARATE, REFUSING TO MIX LIKE OIL AND WATER.

THE WRITTEN WORD WAS BECOMING MORE SPECIALIZED, MORE ABSTRACT, MORE ELABORATE--

--AND LESS AND LESS LIKE PICTURES.

PICTURES, MEANWHILE, BEGAN TO GROW IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION: LESS ABSTRACT OR SYMBOLIC, MORE REPRESENTATIONAL AND SPECIFIC.
Ode on a Grecian Urn

John Keats

1819

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

By the early 1800's, Western art and writing had drifted about as far apart as was possible.

One was obsessed with resemblance, light and color, all things visible...

...the other rich in invisible treasures, senses, emotions, spirituality, philosophy...

Pictures and words, once together in the center of our iconic abstraction chart, have at this point drifted to opposite corners.
In a way, pictures and words had reached the end of a 5,000 year journey. If they were to continue moving, where could they go?

For pictures, there was only up!

Impressionism sent Western art toward the abstract vertex, but in a way that clung to what the eye saw.

Impressionism, while it could be thought of as the first modern movement, was more a culmination of the old, the ultimate study of light and color.

Soon after came the explosion! Expressionism, futurism, dada, surrealism, fauvism, cubism, abstract expressionism, neo-plasticism, constructivism.

Every which way but backwards!

Strict representational styles were of little importance to the new schools. Abstraction, both iconic and non-iconic made a spectacular comeback!

Facsimile details of portraits by Picasso, leger and klee.
SOME ARTISTS HEADED UPWARD TO THE SUMMIT OF THE PICTURE PLANE, WANTING NEITHER RESEMBLANCE NOR EXTERNAL "MEANING."

BUT THE MAIN THrust WAS A RETURN TO MEANING IN ART, AWAY FROM RESEMBLANCE, BACK TO THE REALM OF IDEAS.

MEANWHILE, THE WRITTEN WORD WAS ALSO CHANGING. POETRY BEGAN TURNING AWAY FROM THE ELUSIVE, TWICE-ABSTRACTED LANGUAGE OF OLD TOWARD A MORE DIRECT, EVEN COLOQUIAL, STYLE.

IN PROSE, LANGUAGE WAS BECOMING EVEN MORE DIRECT, CONVEYING MEANING SIMPLY AND QUICKLY, MORE LIKE PICTURES.

“MEANING” WAS NOT ABANDONED BY ANY MEANS, BUT AUTHORS WERE DEFINITELY MOVING LEFT--

Walt Whitman 1890
Facing West from California's Shores

Facing west, from California's shores, Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound, I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity, the land of migrations, look afar Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled: For starting westward from Hindustan, from the vales of Kashmir, From Asia, from the north, from the God, the sage, and the hero, From the south, from the flowery peninsulas and the spice islands, Long having wandered since, round the earth having wandered, Now I face home again, very pleased and joyous; (But where is what I started for, so long ago? And why is it yet unfound?)

-- AND HEADED FOR A COLLISION!
The work of Dadaists, Futurists and various individual artists of the modern era breached the frontier between appearance and meaning.

Dada Poster for the play "The Bearded Heart"

Paintings increasingly took on symbolic, even calligraphic, meanings...

While some artists addressed the ironies of words and pictures head-on!

Leci n'est pas une pipe...
AND IN POPULAR CULTURE THE TWO FORMS COLLIDED AGAIN AND AGAIN WITHOUT ANY PRETENCES OF 'HIGH' ART.

NOWHERE IS THIS COLLISION MORE THOROUGHLY EXPLORED THAN THE MODERN COMIC, AND IT'S NOT A RECENT OBSESSION.

LET'S GO BACK TO THE EARLY 1800s BEFORE ANY OF THIS HAPPENED, WHEN WORDS AND PICTURES HAD DRIFTED AS FAR APART AS POSSIBLE.

UP TO THAT POINT, EUROPEAN BROADSHEETS HAD OFFERED REMINDERS OF WHAT WORDS AND PICTURES COULD DO WHEN COMBINED.

BUT AGAIN IT WAS RODOLPHE TOPPFFER WHO FORESAW THEIR INTERDEPENDENCY AND BROUGHT THE FAMILY BACK TOGETHER AT LAST.

M. CREPIN ADVERTISES FOR A TUTOR, AND MANY APPLY FOR THE JOB.

I'M SURE THAT THESE IDEAS WERE THE FURTHER THING FROM TOPPFFER'S MIND WHEN HE PUT PEN TO PAPER—

--BUT THE FACT THAT THE MODERN COMIC WAS BORN JUST AS ART AND WRITING WERE PREPARING TO CHANGE DIRECTION IS AT LEAST INTRIGUING.

AND PERHAPS THIS COMMON THREAD OF UNIFICATION DID GROW OUT OF A SHARED INSTINCT OF THE DAY...

...AN INSTINCT WHICH SAID THAT WE HAD REACHED THE END OF A LONG JOURNEY AND THAT IT WAS TIME AT LAST TO HEAD FOR HOME.
UNFORTUNATELY FOR COMICS, NO SOONER HAD THE FINE ARTS DISCOVERED THE LINK BETWEEN WORDS AND PICTURES -- THAN MODERN ART ITSELF BECAME VIRTUALLY INCOMPREHENSIBLE TO THE AVERAGE VIEWER!

WHAT THE HECK IS THAT??!

IT'S A HOAX, I TELL YA! MY TWO-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER CAN PAINT BETTER THAN THAT!

DO PEOPLE REALLY PAY MONEY FOR THIS??

COOL.

IN FACT, THE GENERAL PUBLIC'S PERCEPTIONS OF "GREAT" ART AND "GREAT" WRITING HASN'T CHANGED MUCH IN 150 YEARS. ANY ARTIST WISHING TO DO GREAT WORK IN A MEDIUM USING WORDS AND PICTURES WILL HAVE TO CONTEND WITH THIS ATTITUDE.

IN OTHERS AND IN THEMSELVES...

Thou still unravish'd bride
Thou foster-child of silence
Sylvan historian, who can
A flowery tale more sweetly
What leaf fring'd legend here
Of deities or mortals, or
In Tempe or the dales
What men or gods are these
What mad pursuit? What strange delight?
What pines and timbrels

BECAUSE, DEEP DOWN INSIDE, MANY COMICS CREATORS STILL MEASURE ART AND WRITING BY DIFFERENT STANDARDS AND ACT ON THE FAITH THAT "GREAT" ART AND "GREAT" WRITING WILL COMBINE HARMONIOUSLY BY VIRTUE OF QUALITY ALONE.

* NOT AS MUCH AS WE LIKE TO THINK IT HAS, ANYWAY.
THE ART FORM OF COMICS IS MANY CENTURIES OLD, BUT IT'S PERCEIVED AS A RECENT INVENTION AND SUFFERS THE CURSE OF ALL NEW MEDIA.

EVER SINCE THE INVENTION OF THE WRITTEN WORD, NEW MEDIA HAVE BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD.

CAREFUL, JACOB! IF YOU KEEP DOING THIS, YOU'LL STOP USING YOUR MEMORY!

FAR TOO MANY COMICS Creators HAVE NO HIGHER GOAL THAN TO MATCH THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF OTHER MEDIA, AND VIEW ANY CHANCE TO WORK IN OTHER MEDIA AS A STEP UP.

THE CURSE OF BEING JUDGED BY THE STANDARDS OF THE OLD.

EACH NEW MEDIUM BEGINS ITS LIFE BY ImitATING ITS PREDECESSORS. MANY EARLY MOVIES WERE LIKE FILMED STAGE PLAYS, MUCH EARLY TELEVISION WAS LIKE RADIO WITH PICTURES OR REDUCED MOVIES.

AND AGAIN, AS LONG AS WE VIEW COMICS AS A GENRE OF WRITING OR A STYLE OF GRAPHIC ART THIS ATTITUDE MAY NEVER DISAPPEAR.
WORDS AND PICTURES IN COMBINATION MAY NOT BE MY DEFINITION OF COMICS, BUT THE COMBINATION HAS HAD TREMENDOUS INFLUENCE ON ITS GROWTH.

And indeed, words and pictures have great powers to tell stories when creators fully exploit them both.

As a result—and despite its many other potential uses—comics have become firmly identified with the art of storytelling.

As children, we “show and tell” interchangeably, words and images combining to transmit a connected series of ideas.

The different ways in which words and pictures can combine in comics is virtually unlimited.

And so far, we’ve only seen the tip of the iceberg!
First, we have the word specific combinations, where pictures illustrate, but don't significantly add to a largely complete text.

We stumbled back to the apartment shortly before dawn, vomiting every 20 yards.

Judy gave me her keys and smiled.

The United States Constitution was adopted by the Second Continental Congress in 1787 and put into effect in 1789.

Then there are picture specific combinations where words do little more than add a soundtrack to a visually told sequence.

And, of course, duo-specific panels in which both words and pictures send essentially the same message.

Grim-faced, George lifted his lollypop.

But the captain's mighty blow misses its intended target! Blast! He dodged my punch and I struck this brick wall! Ha! I dodged you! I feel so sad!

Thought Amy.
Another type is the **additive** combination where words amplify or elaborate on an image or vice versa.

My head feels like a smashed pumpkin!

Is this the same Jupiter of my youth?

In **parallel** combinations, words and pictures seem to follow very different courses—without intersecting.

“Talked to Bill yet?”

“Sally did. Why?”

“The test results came back. All negative.”

“Really? That’s great!”

Well...

Still another option is the **montage** where words are treated as integral parts of the picture.

PEPPER. CEREAL.

Milk. Butter.

Light bulbs.


Happy!
Perhaps the most common type of word/picture combination is the interdependent, where words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone.

I ask you, does this guy look like a C.E.O. to you??

"And just GUESS who drove up in Bob's truck an hour later?"

"Hey Marge! Oh, my God!"

"After college, I pursued a career in high finance."

He's lying.

Uh-huh.

Generally speaking, the more is said with words, the more the pictures can be freed to go exploring and vice versa.

Interdependent combinations aren't always an equal balance though and may fall anywhere on a scale between types one and two.
IN COMICS AT ITS BEST, WORDS AND PICTURES ARE LIKE PARTNERS IN A DANCE AND EACH ONE TAKES "LEADING"

WHEN BOTH PARTNERS TRY TO LEAD, THE COMPETITION CAN SUBVERT THE OVERALL GOALS...

YOW!

THOUGH A LITTLE PLAYFUL COMPETITION CAN SOMETIMES PRODUCE ENJOYABLE RESULTS.

BUT WHEN THESE PARTNERS EACH KNOW THEIR ROLES--

--AND SUPPORT EACH OTHER'S STRENGTHS--

--COMICS CAN MATCH ANY OF THE ART FORMS IT DRAWS SO MUCH OF ITS STRENGTH FROM.
When pictures carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free words to explore a wider area.

Let's say I show you a woman walking across the street in the rain, buying a pint of ice cream and eating it in her apartment—

—all in pictures.
 WHEN A SCENE SHOWS YOU ALL YOU "NEED" TO KNOW, LIKE THIS ONE, THE LATITUDE FOR SCRIPTING GROWS ENORMOUSLY.

I MAY BE ALONE LIKE THIS FOR A VERY LONG TIME.

IT COULD BECOME AN INTERNAL MONOLOGUE.

(PARALLEL)

PERHAPS SOMETHING WILDLY INCONGRUOUS

"MISSION CONTROL, MISSION CONTROL, DO YOU READ ME?"

(MISSING DATE)

MAYBE IT'S ALL JUST A BIG ADVERTISEMENT.

YOU'LL LOVE THE TASTE!

(INTERDEPENDENT)

OR A CHANCE TO RUMINATE ON BROADER TOPICS.

THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS...

CHOCOLATE CHOCOLATE CHIP

(INTERDEPENDENT)
ON THE OTHER HAND, IF THE **WORDS**
LOCK IN THE "MEANING" OF A SEQUENCE,
THEN THE **PICTURES** CAN REALLY TAKE OFF.

SAME
SCENE NOW,
BUT THIS TIME
ALL IN **WORDS**!

I CROSSED THE STREET TO THE CONVENIENCE STORE.
THE RAIN SOAKED INTO MY BOOTS.

I FOUND THE LAST PINT OF CHOCOLATE CHOCOLATE CHIP IN THE FREEZER.

THE CLERK TRIED TO PICK ME UP. I SAID **NO THANKS**. HE GAVE ME THIS CREEPY LOOK...

I WENT BACK TO THE APARTMENT--

--AND FINISHED IT ALL IN AN HOUR.

**ALONE** AT LAST.
NOW, ONE COULD JUST COMBINE THE PICTURES FROM PAGE 157 WITH THE WORDS FROM PAGE 159 ---

—but what are some other options?

I CROSSED THE STREET TO THE CONVENIENCE STORE. THE RAIN SOAKED INTO MY BOOTS.

IF THE ARTIST WANTS TO, HE/SHE CAN NOW SHOW ONLY FRAGMENTS OF A SCENE.

(WORD SPECIFIC)

I WENT BACK TO THE APARTMENT---

AND FINISHED IT ALL IN AN HOUR.

ALONE AT LAST.

OR MOVE TOWARD GREATER LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION OR EXPRESSION.

THE CLERK TRIED TO PICK ME UP. I SAID NO THANKS. HE GAVE ME THIS CREEPY LOOK...

(AMPLIFICATION)

PERHAPS THE ARTIST CAN GIVE US SOME IMPORTANT EMOTIONAL INFORMATION.

OR SHIFT AHEAD OR BACKWARDS IN TIME.

(I INTERDEPENDENT)

I WENT BACK TO THE APARTMENT---

--AND FINISHED IT ALL IN AN HOUR.

ALONE AT LAST.

(WORD SPECIFIC)
However much we may chart these things, they're all ultimately best left to the creator's instincts.

The mixing of words and pictures is more alchemy than science.

Some of the secrets of those first alchemists may have been lost in the ancient past.

But we have some powerful magic right here in the 20th century, too! The richness of modern language is an irreplaceable commodity.

This is an exciting time to be making comics, and in many ways I feel very lucky to have been born when I was.

Still, I do feel a certain vague longing for that time over 50 centuries ago--

-- when to tell was to show--

-- and to show was to tell.