

*Report, Outcry, Wordthing:  
Outlines for a  
Sane Literary Aesthetic*

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**W**ORKS of imaginative literature, when successful, are seen to be, like other works of art, possessed of that completeness which Joyce, following Aquinas, described as unity, harmony, and radiance. What is proposed here is a critical approach to this completeness.

The approach concentrates on poetry, since it is assumed here that, on the whole, the characteristics of imaginative language are to be found at their most complete and their most intense in poetry. However, if the system is valid, it will apply with modifications to other forms of literature, and even to some extent to other forms of art. Moreover, what is said here of complete poetic language will be found to be more accurate as a description of the language of a good play, novel or short story than of the language of a bad poem.

*Poem*

A poem may be considered as a wordthing created for its own sake. Its end is joy; and this is joy in its excellence as wordshape, or, to quote Hopkins, 'the inscape of speech for the inscape's sake . . .' Such a formulation may seem at first to point towards an inverted aestheticism, but this was not so for Hopkins, nor will it be so for any poet or critic who considers that a poem must be made out of the most excellent *language*. The nature of language, even when considered as mere shaper's material will be no less than the focus of the whole art. The words within a poem must be related in the most excellent possible way, and to do this the poet must understand with his whole being how language works.

### Words

A word is a THING and it is a SIGN. It is a *thing* considered as sound or as lettershape (or as a relationship between simpler sounds and lettershapes). As sound it is related to *all* other sounds, it belongs to the soundworld. As lettershape it is related to *all* other visual experience. Another interesting relationship is to be found between its soundshape and its lettershape. But a word is first and foremost a SIGN, not having its essential being in itself but in its function as a NAME. It is not so much a thing as an activity of the consciousness. Yet it is also a thing, a space-time object, and if it were not it could not be used for art. Its reality can be described then as a relationship between shape and meaning. So it follows that, if the words in the poem are to be related in the most excellent possible way, *the relationship which is the poem* must be excellent in all its aspects as a wordthing: that is excellent as *a shape of meaning* and as *a shape of matter* FUSED INTO ONE SHAPE. It is the nature of language itself to tend towards an actual reflection of meaning in the word as object: in poetry this tendency can be developed into a complex and significant harmony.

### Experience

The poet's experience, which is what he shapes into poems, can be considered in various ways. It is useful to recognize areas of experience, provided always that it is realized that these are not in any sense absolute divisions and can always be seen to be aspects of the same reality. First we may take the poet's experience of language: his consciousness of it and reaction to it at all times and under all circumstances; since, when he is making a poem, he is completely dependent on this experience. It is through this aspect of reality and in relation to it that his inspiration functions.

Next there is the personal element of his experience: his reaction to living as body, mind, and soul. This is his world as uniquely personal.

Finally there is his experience of non-self: the variety scope and intensity of the outer impressions to which his consciousness is exposed.

These areas of experience are aspects of the same total reality. They are interrelated in innumerable ways in the consciousness of the poet and it may be further said *that it is upon the intensity and*

*scope of these interrelations that the nature and quality of individual poems depend.*

One kind of experience which can be considered as belonging to all the areas already noted, and which is of decisive interest to the poet, is his experience of poetry itself, whether his own poems or those of others. This is likely to be his most intense experience of language as such and hence an astonishingly intricate relationship between exterior impact and personal reaction.

### *Relationship*

All experience is relationship between knower and known. All language whether considered as word or statement reflects the nature of that relationship in the form of new relationships between wordshapes and meanings (simple or complex).

Reality, experience of reality, expression of reality can all be considered as relationships. Relationships (the atom, knowledge, music) are living energy of form. The most complete and intense relationship, the finest and most creative energy is consciousness itself. Poetry is language incarnating, affirming, and celebrating conscious relationship. Poetry seeks to find a verbal analogy for totalities of experience, of consciousness. Hence its characteristic use of imagery which is the language of related significance.

All artists, all poets are concerned with relationship both as experiencers and as creators, but the ways in which they are concerned, and the levels of experience and creation on which different aspects of relationship are felt, vary with personality, background, and time.

### *Making: Relationships of Poetic Purpose*

All poets are concerned to produce an excellent relationship of words. We may distinguish different aspects or areas of meaning or relationship which are always present in good poetry but which vary in importance, quality, and proportion from period to period, from poet to poet, and from poem to poem. Again it must be emphasized that these aspects or areas are not in practice different but elements of the same unity.

- (1) Poetic intention as TRUTH. The poem as the most full and accurate report of perceived reality. Fidelity of the wordshape to 'objective' relationships. Language as perception.

- (2) Poetic intention as *EXPRESSION*. The poem as a relationship of personal feelings not so much *reported* in words as made present in them. Intensity of the wordshape in recreating personal reactions. Language as passion.
- (3) Poetic intention as *BEAUTY*. The poem as a relationship rejoiced in simply as relationship. Excellence of order, pattern, proportion. Language as aesthetic composition.

(1) and (2) may be called intentions of content or meaning, and (3) may be called an intention of shape or pattern. But this is an over-simplification which verges on the inane because truth and passion are shaped and call for verbal shape, and verbal beauty without content or meaning is a contradiction in terms.

Yet, particularly in minor poetry, one or two intentions may be *dominant* and just as there are aspects of language which reflect the various aspects of experience, so also there are aspects of both language and experience which will attract the poet because of their relevance to his intention. (A simple example: a poet with a strong appetite for poetry as report will delight in making accurate observations and will treasure precise and detailed descriptions.)

The making of a poem is in one sense a synthesis of these three intentions in action, and every good poem holds the three different aspects of language in creative relationship.

It is a matter of synthesis, of balance; for each creative intention can be driven to such an extreme that it ceases to be language, not to speak of poetry. Description hankers to *be* the object, expression deteriorates into meaningless outcry, and an extreme and disassociated aesthetic appetite can seek to reduce words to mere physical sounds or shapes stripped of their significant function.

Each or any combination of intention can be dominant, as has been suggested; but if all are not present and active we get no poem. We may go even farther and suggest that an over-powerful dominance of one over the others, or of any two over the third can only produce minor or maimed work.

The character of a poem may be described in terms of the interplay or synthesis of the different aspects; and authors, schools, and periods may be seen as developing characteristic patterns of synthetic relationship. What must always be remembered is that good poetry is a *fusing* of linguistic functions so that

each word is fully operative, describing, expressing, and taking its place in a finely ordered unity. In act the functions themselves become one and the same.

### *The Ideal Totality*

The perfect poem would be a complete and intense synthesis of total experience in terms of total language. All the works of imaginative literature to which we usually apply the term 'great' make some attempt to create such a complete relationship.

Total statement being only an ideal, even great poems must accept limitation. Yet, although it cannot achieve absolute totality, every poem must be complete, that is, achieve a unified excellence within its enforced or chosen limitations. Because of the resources of poetic language — each word potentially related to the whole web of language — poetry can transcend what may seem at first very severe limitations. The better a poem is the more intense and wideranging are the relationships implicit in it. The power to *suggest* all sorts of relationships simultaneously is one of the most important characteristics of poetic language and is its mode of compression; the nature of this compression is precisely to achieve richness of relationship within limitation.

### *Limitations*

The limitations of actual works are voluntary or involuntary and can be best regarded as limitations of conscious relationship. Three aspects of limitations are:

- (a) INTENSITY — the energy of the perception of relationship.
- (b) SCOPE — the range and depth of the perception of relationship.
- (c) LANGUAGE — the energy, range and depth of linguistic relationship and of the relationship between language and experience.

### *Aspects of Limitation*

The intensity and range of poetry may be limited in different ways. However, before trying to distinguish between these kinds of limitation, it should be stressed that in actual poetry they are and must be interrelated. Limitations in the range and intensity of a poets' experience as a man will determine to some extent the

nature of his poetic purpose, and hence of his poetry; conversely, limitations in his poetic purpose will limit the range of his experience subjected to the poetic purpose; and so on.

(a) Limitations of the experience out of which the poet may make his poetry. These may be considered as both objective (i.e. the human and physical environment to which his sensibility is exposed) and as subjective (i.e. his physical, emotional, and intellectual equipment). To put it another way, the range and intensity of the reality to which he is exposed and the range and intensity of his personal reactions to this exposure are both limited and limit each other. One very important area of experience, as has already been pointed out, is the area of language in all its aspects. The uses of language which he experiences and his reactions to these uses are all-important in forming his poetic sensibility.

(b) Limitations to inspiration. The poetic intention may also be limited in a number of ways in scope and intensity. There may be limitations of both synthesis and of shaping. Such limitations are obviously interrelated in very complex ways and are conditioned by limitations of experience.

(c) Limitations of the poem in action. Even the physical appearance of a poem on paper imposes limitations. Far more important are the limitations of the reader or listener who experiences the poem. The whole problem of communication and of the *obscurity* of some poetry comes under this heading.

### *Parallels*

Here are some tentative parallels between areas of experience, value, poetic intention, and use of language:

<i>Experience</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Intention</i>	<i>Language</i>
'Impersonal' perception of reality as 'other'	Truth (as known)	Reporting	Accurate
'Personal' perception of reality as 'self'	Truth (as felt)	Expressing	Passionate
'Impersonal-personal' perception of reality as relationship	Beauty	Shaping	Ordered

This formulation is rather crudely analytic, but if it is kept in mind that these are (or should be) related aspects of total poems and not rigid categories of separation, such a formulation can have a definite if limited use in examining both creative writing and the critical attitudes, particularly those of a period like the twentieth century which is so marked by specialization and even disintegration.

(1) To re-state what we have already said about total poetry and about limitation in terms of this formulation: in all good poetry intricate relationships of intention draw on experience, itself intricately related, and fuse it into a verbal artefact. In great poetry we find an intention which is a *unity* — a total synthesis of the three aspects of possible intention listed above; and this intention leads to an incarnation of totally related experience in accurate, passionate, beautifully ordered language.

(2) Yet all poetry, great and good, must have intentional and unintentional limitations, since the experience available to the poet is limited in scope and intensity, and since no inspiration or creative intention can be an absolute, and since the limitations of language itself must be taken into account. Moreover we may discover *typical* limitations in the work of individuals and of schools and periods.

#### *Critical Theory as Affecting and Affected by Poetic Limitation*

Limitations in the actual poetry produced at any time or available to critics of that time both (1) cause, and (2) are caused by critical theories of the nature of poetry and hence of its significance and use. Most critical theories are far more limited, far more selective, far more arbitrary and slanted than the poems they seek to illuminate. Most of these theories seek to limit poetry in the range of experience and in the relationships proper to it, and also in both the range of intention which may be considered truly poetic and the sorts of language which a poet may legitimately use.

From time to time in the history of literature we find critics with a simple formulation — a magic secret at the heart of poetry. Such a secret almost always turns out to be ‘What matters is truth — exact and vivid description’, or ‘What matters is intensity — the true voice of feeling’, or it may be ‘Poetry is language

as beauty — a poem does not state, it simply *is*.' Other critics, and this in justice is more common, may have a firm grasp of any two, but it is only the best who see the abiding necessity of all three for the validity of poetic language.

The ease with which different poetic intentions and different aspects of language can be separated in criticism has received some interesting attention in recent studies. M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* shows how critical judgements in the nineteenth century were usually made from one or other of the following standpoints: Mimetic, which judged the work as report on reality; Pragmatic — for its audience effect; Expressive — as personal statement; or Objective — as a work of art. Graham Hough in his important *Essay on Criticism* demonstrates the constant presence in European criticism of two main approaches, the 'Moral' which concerns itself with the human content of literature (descriptive and expressive) and the 'Formal' which concerns itself with literature as art. Finally W. K. Wimsatt, Jr, in *The Verbal Icon*, writes:

I believe that there are three main poles of literary theory: (1) the mimetic or Aristotelean which does justice to the world of things and real values and keeps our criticism from being merely idealistic; (2) the emotive (as seen, for instance, in Richards), which does justice to human response to values and keeps criticism from talking too much about either ethics or metaphysics; (3) the expressionistic and linguistic (*par excellence*, the Crocean) which does justice to man's knowledge as reflexive and creative, and keeps criticism from talking about poetry as a literal recording of either things or responses. (p. 489)

Once criticism has laid down limitations in the nature of poetry it inevitably goes on to limit its own function — to say that only certain critical approaches and techniques are valuable or valid.

All revolutions in the world of creative writing spring from a rejection of systems of limitation which have been the established creative and critical norm. All major changes in the development of literature are caused by writers who seek to free the creative imagination, to give expression more potential, to revivify systems of living relationship in language, and to discover new systems which spring from and embody living changing human experience.