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The Dynamics of Poetry

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The Dynamics of Poetry

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The poet does not, cannot, waste words. He is, for the most part, devoid of digression, those sideroads so common, and so enjoyable to the writers of prose. Thus, his use of language is direct, intense, evocative--in a word, electric. Within the core of poetry flashes the electrification of language."

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THE DYNAMICS OF POETRY

The poet does not, cannot, waste words. He is, for the most part, devoid of digression, those sidetracks so common, and so enjoyable to the writers of prose. Thus, his use of language is direct, intense, evocative—in a word, electric. Within the cure of poetry flashes the electrification of language.

What makes poetry to be what it is—the essence, if you will—is the union of a vitalized language with a vibrant meter.

Poetry defies definition in that it is more than an artistic form or a mere sounding board from which to expound. Rather, it is an emotional experience of an intellectual concept by means of infused, dynamic, structured language.

The poet does not differ from the prose writer intellectually, for both have intelligent (if emotional) ideas to present, and do so. Yet the poet has more rules to obey and less space in which to generate his concept to fulfillment, yet he somehow rises above these seeming conventions to state his case in a far more profound, surciner, explosive manner. "Somehow" — how does the poet triumph? Language is the keynote.

It may seem at this point that one ignores the other elements essential to poetry. But, theme, substance, imagery, mood, tone, and the rest are also components of prose.

Who can deny that Hemingway or O'Hara have "substance" in their writing; or who could read James Joyce without realizing the complexities of imagery within? And no writing is without mood, whether it be Poe or Henry Clune; Henry James typifies, as does Flaubert, the value of tone. These elements—the very stuff of writing—are omnipresent. But the language of poetry is unique. (One must, at this point qualify this to the extent that the dramatist, too, must make the greatest use of every word, every action; but as the playwright is not as solely dependent upon language as the poet with the additional props of dramatic technique, actors, lighting, and other elements, he cannot be considered to use language one would call "electric.")

Meter, in relation to poetry, is analogous to the background music of a good movie. It is not only present, it is necessary—it conveys a mood or a rhythm which is the very "soul" of the poem. If the substance can be equated to the body of the poem, then the meter is the personality or the spirit of the same, for it makes the sophisticated reader or listener live into the fantasy of the poet's mind, whether he keep a steady, solemn undertone, a staccato tempo, or a combination of several to transfix the hearer (for one really hears poetry) onto the roller coaster of his emotions.

Thus, this combination of the omnipresent meter coupled with the intensified, electrified language of the poem gives poetry a dimension which prose cannot match. Structurally, this is the nature of poetry.

But what is the function of the poet, given his poetic structure and conventions? All art is expression, only the form

differs. So what is it about the poet that makes him choose to express his ideas within the confines of his art? Could he not say the same thing prosaically?

The answer, ambiguously enough, is yes and no. Yes, he could be mundane and lucid as a newspaper reporter, or fanciful, frothy and profound as Faulkner. No, because the poet is special; he sees his role as not only a chronicler, a commentator and a re-evaluator of the mores of society, but also as a pure artist giving objective expression to a theme. This he does by inference, by innuendo, by subtlety, by exposing not the concrete but the abstract, not the black or the white but the gray with certain overtones, not the answer but the clue. He leaves the final treasure to the beholder to uncover. He transfers his imagination, his creativity, to that of the reader so that the latter may enjoy the freedom of expression—a new sanction. In short, he makes the hearer an active participant—the apathetic becomes, or must become, a seeker of the truth, the beauty, and the mystery in the poem.

Today's poet is fortunate, in a sense that his audience is "high-brow", whereas the novelist for the most part must appeal to the middle brow or mass cult group. For the poet this smaller audience proves a sanction, because his readers are his by choice and a rapport is immediately established. He does not seek an audience; rather, he is joined by one in an overall quest for perception and wisdom. The poet is the guide and one of the party, and not an inflated pedant.

But what other primary facts need to be stated about the nature of poetry? Certainly poetry is what it is because of the electrified language and the subtle meter, but it is also dependent upon what the poet is and to what extent he fulfills his vision and his vocation. The poet must be explorer and seer. Yet there is another realm distinct from that of the poet and the printed page—that of the reader. Poetry lives in the mind and spirit of the reader as well, for poetry, ideally at least, engulfs him and kidnaps his imagination for its sheer imaginative power, if not for wisdom alone.

Poetry, as was stated earlier, defies definition. For Poe it was "the rhythmic creation of beauty." For another it is the evocation of the ineffable by association; it is also the electrification of language. It may be that poetry cannot be defined prosaically—a jest of Divine origin. Coleridge said that the power of poetry is "to instill such energy into the human mind so as to compel the perceptive imagination to produce the picture" and whose vital power "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create." The poet's gift, also according to Coleridge, "is to produce musical delight." His words echo one's own feelings: the combination of energized language and fluid, enveloping meter. Archibald MacLennan summarizes this thesis perfectly:

"The poem must not merely say,
But be."

Robert Rossi