

THE NERVES IN PATTERNS ON A SCREEN

A Technique of Poetry

The term 'subject matter' has been used to such an extent in the discussion of poetry that it has lost its meaning, and indeed on close analysis it may be seen that in relation to poetry the term itself is meaningless. The matter of a poem is the written material in the poem - that is, the poem is its own matter as far as the written/printed form of the poem is concerned. The subject of a poem should not, in most cases, be present in the poem at all - if the subject of the poem is capable of being expressed in mere words it should be expressed in concise prose, not poetry. (Despite the pedestal prose has found itself upon in recent literary history, one may still regard prose as an ideal vehicle for direct communication when direct communication of an easily expressible idea is desired.) Poetry is above all concerned with indirect communication. In fiction, for example, one quite frequently 'identifies' with a chief character in the work, not with the author. In poetry one tries to identify not with any character or object in the poem, but with the poet in order to see what it is that the poet is trying to communicate. It is up to the poet to concern himself with the abstract and to communicate the abstract not through abstract terminology or jargon, but in terms of objects. When one talks about poetry one should separate the 'subject' of the poem from its 'object materials', i.e. the poet's mind from the poem, the message from the medium. A poem communicates by asking the reader to step back and manoeuvre his mind, until he is in a position to see the common factor of each object that makes up the material of the poem. It is like trying to align a pin-hole in several sheets of cardboard - the poet has fixed them in such a way that it is possible to see through them all from one stand-point, and the ideas of the poet are communicated when the reader mentally stands in the same spot as the poet and sees the ruling principle of the poem.

A good poem allows the reader to see the ideas through the least number of object materials - i.e. the poet is sparing with his materials, but more importantly it is economical, using as many materials as are necessary for the efficient transmission of the ideas, without encumbering the work needlessly. A good poet not only knows what to put into a poem, but also what to leave out. Another aspect of this argument is that a reader should be sufficiently encouraged after one reading of a poem to see that it is meaningful and communicative. If not, the poem will never function, for it will never be read by any reader more than once. It may be that the poet is trying to communicate a notion too abstract and/or too complex to be expressed in one poem, in which case the subject should be expressed in more than one poem. Equally obviously, the theory of economy should be practised within the poem, line by line, word by word, letter by letter if necessary. The proviso on such economy is that it should be economy, not false saving, for the poem must, above all, communicate ideas outside its written statement.

The poet works in a medium of words, of sounds, of blocks and spaces. The poem often exists in two distinct ways - aurally and visually, and poets usually tend to one or the other of these modes of existence for their work.

(e.g., Shakespeare's sonnets are primarily aural poems, concrete poems are primarily visual. Some poets in the United States during the '20's and '30's experimented with poems that tried to exist in both modes, and their poems failed to effectively cater to either mode.)

Economy is gained through efficient use of metre for aural poetry, minimal use of punctuation etc. for visual poetry. The poet must present the minimum number of objects necessary to communicate his ideas, and present these objects in the briefest manner possible (yet still permitting identification of the object). In aural poetry the poet is restricted by melody and harmony, frequently by rhyme (especially in lyrical poetry) and a concession to the traditional figures concerned with sound qualities. The poet writing visual poetry is more strictly confined to the primary function of communication—he presents objects in as few words as possible, utilizes punctuation and word repetition as means to technical structure and aids to economy. The major constraining factor on the visual poet is to ensure that his poem moves as quickly as the mental processes of the reader - that the poet is not 'talking down' to the reader, but rather asking the reader to participate in the creation process. In this way it may be seen that the visual poet does not work in phrases or sound groupings of words, but rather groups his objects into blocks of data, geared for processing by the reader's mind. He uses his punctuation as algebraic symbols - abbreviated forms to permit rapidity of communication. Above all, the visual poet works with words - the poem per se is the product of his craftsmanship in assembling and structuring his data, a codification of the abstract idea.

The final point of this brief statement links with the first notion, that of the objectivity of the poem. The poet can be nothing but subjective in his view of the objects that comprise his poem, but he must record the objects, and communicate his subjective response to them by means of juxtaposition, as the 'Metaphysical' poets did.

Excesses occur when the poet is attempting to express an emotion in words. This cannot totally be achieved, nor is it virtuous to try to achieve it - the emotion is drained from the statement because it is directly expressed, rather than communicated through a presentation of objects. The basic difference is between the poet saying he feels rotten inside and presenting the reader with the external causes of his internal rottenness, in such a way that the reader can (imaginatively) feel rotten inside. The difference is precisely between feeling for the poet and feeling with the poet.

The aesthetics of poetry are concerned with the technical skill of the poet - it is illogical for a poem to be beautiful either in sound or visually (i.e. on the page) unless that poem communicates. It is not impossible for a poem to be ugly or discordant and to partially communicate but the poet is not communicating as well as he might if his medium is not being used to its best advantage. The poem will fail completely if it cannot be tolerated by its reader because of poor craftsmanship. Similarly, there is no question of a moral or immoral poem - the poem contains only objective data and the reader is not recreating the poem if he is passing an extra-creative judgement on the poem.

The poem can only be judged in terms of communication through effective use of a medium. The poet's idea may be judged, if judgement is called for, but this is a judgement of the poet (and of the reader!) not of the poem.

It is obviously not possible in this brief space to re-write Sidney's Defense of Poesy and Wordsworth's Preface, but it is essential that some attempt should be made to define a framework within which contemporary poetry may be discussed.

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