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METAPHOR AND REALITY

A METAPHOR IS A REJECTION. It does not attest to an inability to see, for dealers in metaphor are, most often, those who possess the ability to see with supreme clarity and breadth of vision; it attests, rather, to a deep-seated unwillingness to see that one sees what one sees. Or, to put it somewhat differently, metaphors come after, follow upon perceptions; and, since by their very nature they transpose what has been perceived, they tell us that the perceiver is somehow dissatisfied with what has come into his head, lodged behind his eyes, "crossed his mind". They tell us, in short, that the subject prefers to express the objects (and affect states are included here) which intrude upon his consciousness in terms of *other* objects, and that these other objects—those that embody the metaphor—must, for one reason or another, be more pleasing, or better, more acceptable to him than those which, from no fault of their own, were there, simply there, in the world.

It is not, then, suggested that those who refuse to create metaphors, or are unable to create them, are better able to see; usually they are not; few are; but—and this is the point—our Western poets, contrary to all appearances, are not among the few: although their eyes are not closed, they are averted. Perhaps this is what Miss Stein was trying to tell us when she made her seemingly innocent remark—now, interestingly enough, become cryptic and troublesome and famous—that a rose "is a rose is a rose is a rose". Perhaps there is all of the reality principle in these few anapestic monosyllables. But why do I say "contrary to all appearances" when referring to the Western poets?

Because they, of all people, are thought to be those who see best or most deeply, or any superlative you choose, the ones that penetrate beneath the surface of things, or, if this topographical figure disturbs, the ones that reveal the essences in the world around us. And it is, of course, through metaphor, through talking about one thing, or *the* thing, in terms of something else that this is done; for Western poetry, if it is anything, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. It is committed to metaphor-in-the-widest-sense as much as the mathematician is committed to numbers, the chemist to matter, or the catcher

to dogs. To paraphrase the late Robert Frost, poetry is a language in which you say one thing and mean something entirely different and are (it is hoped) understood. Or again, and this time I am not paraphrasing, poetry is (or should be) a subtle double-talk, a metaphorical game of suggestion in which "bare ruined choirs" really means leafless trees, or, better, trees that have been forsaken by leaves;¹ in which "I have miles to go before I sleep" means, first of all, just what it means, and, secondly, something like, crudely, "I have years to get through before I die;"² in which "ambiguity" is to be striven for, "ambiguity" meaning here the advantageousness of having words mean not simply one thing else, but many rich, wonderful, moving things else;³ in which beasts are men, as in Dante;⁴ women the Anglican Church, as in Spenser;⁵ tempests psychic disruptions, as in Shakespeare;⁶ storm clouds Death and Satan, as in Milton;⁷ urns unravished brides, as in Keats;⁸ and so on and so on, so obviously and endlessly that I feel inclined to apologize for even beginning to elaborate. What should be re-stated and re-emphasized, however, is that this metaphor, for all we extol it and preach it and teach it and rally to its revelational capacities, is evidence not of penetration but negation, not of seeing but of seeing what one chooses to see, not of delight in things but of inability to delight in things as they are.

The Western poets themselves are wont, on occasion, to reveal this state of affairs to the reader. Shakespeare, for example, writes

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
 Are of imagination all compact.
 One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
 That is, the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
 Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
 The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
 And, as imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name.

(*Midsummer-Night's Dream*, V. i. 7)

Thus the visible universe, the creation and all its multitude of earthly and heavenly displays, is not sufficient for the poet whose characteristic "frenzy" is expressed by an equally characteristic search for new, or "unknown", relationships in the world around him. We must not, of course, be too insistent here since this famous passage is coloured both by Renaissance conceptions of the

imagination⁹ and an exaggerated, comic context. But it does capture, and strikingly, the Western poet's inescapable trademark—his propensity to substitute one thing for another, to skirt the real, objective world by way of his own imaginings. Or take these lines from Wordsworth's *Prelude* (V, 586):

. . . he, who in his youth
 A daily wanderer among woods and fields
 With living Nature hath been intimate,
 Not only in that raw unpractised time
 Is stirred to ecstasy, as others are,
 By glittering verse; but further, doth receive,
 In measure only dealt out to himself,
 Knowledge and increase of enduring joy
 From the great Nature that exists in works
 Of mighty Poets. Visionary power
 Attends the motions of the viewless winds,
 Embodied in the mystery of words:
 There, darkness makes abode, and all the host
 Of shadowy things work endless changes,—there,
 As in a mansion like their proper home,
 Even forms and substances are circumfused
 By that transparent veil with light divine,
 And, through the turnings intricate of verse,
 Present themselves as objects recognized,
 In flashes, and with glory not their own.

Here the poet tells us candidly that the "turnings intricate of verse" (and notice how these lines themselves turn intricately) are capable of "circumfusing" the very "forms and substances" of the visible universe so as to lend to them a "glory" which is, again in the poet's own words, "not their own". And even Pope, who represents an age which prided itself on its good sense and rationality, on its propensity to see things as they are, confesses that although the poet does not actually "alter" reality, he nevertheless "gilds" it with the products of his creative imagination.¹⁰

In one sense, however, this is not breaking new ground, for psychologists and psychoanalysts generally have long recognized the poet's tendency to cope with life by substituting structured, or formal, fantasies for the "facts". Freud, in what may be regarded as a representative passage, writes that the poet

turns away from reality and transfers all his interest, and all his libido too, on the creation of his wishes in the life of fantasy, from which the way might readily lead

to neurosis. There must be many factors in combination to prevent this becoming the whole outcome of his development; it is well known how often artists in particular suffer from partial inhibition of their capacities through neurosis. Probably their constitution is endowed with a powerful capacity for sublimation and with a certain flexibility in the repressions determining the conflict. But the way back to reality is found by the artist. . . .¹¹

But the point that it is particularly important to make here is that Freud's analysis, although it carries us in the right direction (as usual), deposits us just short of the mark by implying that the poet actually finds "the way back to reality." For we must ask, and with a yearning to understand not only the mentality of the Western poet but Freud as well, *what* reality?

Let us begin by clarifying a key phrase: When Freud postulated a "return to reality" he was thinking, it may be submitted, not of reality, but of communication. He was stressing the fact that poets, unlike schizophrenics who also turn away from reality and transfer all of their interest on to the creation of their wishes in the life of fantasy, are somehow able to make their intrapsychic universes intelligible and even meaningful to the mass of Western men. He was emphasizing, in short, that although the original stuff of poetry, stored largely in the unconscious, was every bit as dereistic as the schizophrenics' rambblings, the end product, the recited epic, the published ode, was "realistic" or "communicable" because it had undergone that process of transformation which characterizes artistic genius and which we have yet to understand scientifically.

Thus Freud's "way back to reality" does not mean what it appears to mean; indeed, it cannot mean what it appears to mean simply because Western poetry is, as has been said, overwhelmingly committed to metaphor-in-the-widest-sense, to a process of "fantastic" substitution which speaks for a powerful dissatisfaction with the reality which the poet is ostensibly so anxious to capture and express. For if I am inclined to call a woman's breast a roe and her navel a cup of wine, as does the biblical poet,¹² then I am inclined—for emotional reasons—to make a woman's breast something more (or less) than a woman's breast and her navel something more (or less) than her navel. I am inclined, in short, to reject the actual thing, to repudiate reality and to disguise my repudiation by indulging in a poetic device which is commonly thought to render my deepest insights. In a very real sense, then, metaphorical expression constitutes a method of making war on reality. Indeed, I do believe that we must go so far as to suggest that metaphors, at least in part, *are expressions*

of hostility produced by a dissatisfaction so fundamental, penetrative and buried as to be commonly disguised as love for or relish in the sensual universe.

This idea is strikingly captured by Goethe: "There arose in me that inclination, from which I have not deviated throughout life, to transmute whatever caused me joy or anguish or preoccupied me at all, into an image [i.e., metaphor] in order to settle the account with myself, to rectify my concepts of the world without, as well as to tranquillize my soul. Perhaps no one ever needed this gift more than I. . . ." ¹³ And in these lines of Keats, lines in which the "charioteer" is a metaphorical representation of the power to create metaphors:

The charioteer with wond'rous gesture talks
To the trees and mountains; and there soon appear
Shapes of delight, of mystery, and fear,
Passing along before a dusky space
Made by some mighty oaks: as they would chase
Some ever-fleeting music on they sweep. . . .

Most awfully intent

The driver of those steeds is forward bent,
And seems to listen: O that I might know
All that he writes with such a hurrying glow.

The visions all are fled—the car is fled
Into the light of heaven, and in their stead
A sense of real things comes doubly strong,
And, like a muddy stream, would bear along
My soul to nothingness: but I will strive
Against all doubtings, and will keep alive
The thought of that same chariot, and the strange
Journey it went. (*Sleep and Poetry*, 137)

"I will strive against all doubtings": the aggressiveness just alluded to is as strikingly revealed here as in the passage by Goethe. Nor can we forget the epitaph of someone we have already mentioned, Robert Frost: "I had a lover's quarrel with the world."

The question of course arises, why should this be? Why should Western poetry be structured upon a device which by its very nature expresses dissatisfaction and enables the subject to cope with that dissatisfaction by skirting the world, or, if you prefer, the situation, in which he finds himself? There are, obviously, any number of answers which might be made here, but I am afraid no one of them would satisfy everyone for very long in that the question

we have posed pulls the whole of Western culture into the discussion. I suppose we could mention Plato, or Platonic thinking generally, and say that the trouble lies here, in a philosophy which denigrates the empirical universe and preaches (a Christian-Judaic sounding word) another and better universe of eternal ideas, a philosophy which urges men to transfer their loyalties from the passing show which is supposed to be vain to the permanent forms which exist not exactly somewhere but exist. Yet would not this be simply begging the question? Why should such a philosophy, which renders in a fundamental way the whole tenor of Western thought, have come into existence in the first place? In the face of this dilemma I have concluded that the wisest thing to do would be to mention the now commonplace notion of "civilization and its discontents", hope that the reader will appreciate what is meant by that expression, and pass on to other matters, for the *genesis* of Western ways of feeling and thinking is not the subject of this paper and demands a treatment which, if it is to be responsible, must be exhaustive.

The next question, in triplicate, must be this one: Is not Western poetry representative of poetry generally? Is not all poetry an expression of dissatisfaction, a remarkable and often breath-taking attempt to wriggle out of the plain, blunt fact of being-in-the-world? Is not all poetry, in short, metaphorical? A reply to this may come from talking, very briefly, about a development in Oriental thinking which has given rise to a kind of verse that has of late become remarkably popular in our dissatisfied Western world, in the philosophy, that is, of Zen Buddhism and in its poetic counterpart, the *haiku*.

There are many who regard Zen as an elegant affectation or a subtly disguised invitation to promiscuity, who connect it with beards and pot and would like to see it banned by some sort of congressional injunction or other. There are many, in a word, who regard Zen Buddhism roughly as they regard Existentialism and turn away from it as they turn away from anything strange or foreign which challenges encrusted patterns of thinking and believing. This is unfortunate. For as many of our foremost psychologists and psychoanalysts (most notably Horney and Fromm) have realized, Zen is a serious, perfectly legitimate way of thinking that has a great deal to offer us in philosophical, psychological, and religious insight.

This is because Zen is what might be called a reality-principle credenda, a highly disciplined approach to the problems of living which originally developed as a reaction to excessively metaphysical, quietistic trends in Indian philosophy. The aim of Zen, as it finally emerged in medieval Japan, was to

achieve that state of mind, as R. H. Blythe expresses it, "in which we are not separated from other things, are indeed identical with them, and yet retain our own individual and personal peculiarities."

It was necessary for us to prostrate ourselves before the Buddha, to spend nine long years wall-gazing to be born in the Western Paradise. But now, no more. Now we have to come back from Nirvana to this world, the only one. We have to live, not with Christ in glory, but with Jesus and his mother and father and brothers and sisters. We return to the friends of our childhood, the rain on the window-pane; the long silent roads of night; the waves of the shore that never cease to fall; the moon, so near and yet so far; all the sensations of texture, timbre, weight and shape, those precious treasures and inexhaustible riches of every-day life.¹⁴

Thus Zen came to propose what might be called a "return to things", convinced that only through such a return could the individual appreciate the nature of his being, and to abhor, in the words of Dr. Suzuki, "anything coming between the fact and ourselves".¹⁵

And this is where *haiku* comes in. For *haiku* is, above all else, a child of Zen, a mode of expression which strives to render the individual's "reunion with things", a deceptively simple and ever so sensitive depiction of what happens to the person who has somehow been able to come utterly in contact with the "facts", a sudden, swift, brush-stroke-like capturing of the moment, as in the following few examples, when nothing has come between ourselves and the world:

The cow comes
Moo! Moo!
Out of the mist. (Issa)

In the shop,
The paper-weights on the picture books:
The spring wind! (Kito)

A flower of the camellia-tree
Fell
Spilling its water. (Basho)

From among the peach-trees
Blooming everywhere,
The first cherry blossoms. (Basho)

Now the striking thing about this kind of poetry—and the examples just cited will at once corroborate what I am about to say—is that no matter how much of it one peruses, one almost never comes upon a metaphor! Indeed, it can be said that the peculiar effect that *haiku* has upon those who read it derives ultimately from this characteristic absence of metaphorical expression. And when we remember that this form of verse flourished in a psychological climate totally committed to what we here in the West would call the reality principle, the truth, or at least the partial truth, of our earlier observations on the nature of a metaphor generally becomes apparent. Who is on the side of reality will not be making metaphors, and who will not be making metaphors will perhaps be making the most revelational poetry of all.

Blake, the eighteenth-century English poet-mystic, spoke with enthusiasm about seeing the world in a grain of sand and eternity in a wild flower. But it may be that the most gripping, the most transcendent experience available to us lies in achieving the ability to actually see in a grain of sand, a grain of sand; and in a wild flower, a wild flower.

NOTES

1. Shakespeare, *Sonnet LXXIII*.
2. Robert Frost, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*.
3. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1947).
4. *The Inferno*.
5. *The Fairy Queen*, Book I.
6. *Lear*.
7. *Paradise Lost*, II, 714.
8. *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.
9. See R. W. Dent's essay on the play in *Shakespeare 400*, ed. James G. McManaway (New York, 1964).
10. *Essay on Criticism*, 318.
11. *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Standard Edition, 1916-1917), XVI, 376.
12. *Song of Solomon*, iv, 5; vii, 1.
13. *Poetry and Truth*, Part II, Book 7.
14. R. H. Blyth, *Haiku* (Kamakura Bunko, 1949), pp. iii, ii.
15. *Zen Buddhism* (New York, 1956), p. 9.