

POETRY AND VISION

The element in poetry that I shall call the visionary is not the only element; there is a counter-direction within poetry itself to a visionary poetics. But the visionary is the major thrust of poetry. As all fixed poetic genres and forms are undermined, the primacy of the visionary becomes more evident. This overriding movement in poetry may be defined by its characteristic insights, its mode of construction, and its extraordinary dangers. The mode of construction -- because it has to do with the elementary possible relationship of poetry to language -- is that which a visionary poetics must share in common with the counter-visionary element in poetry.

There are two equivalent ways to describe the ultimate intentions of visionary poetry.

First, there is the theme of a breaking down of fixed partitions between minds. A single mind, in a single world, where all walls have fallen down forever -- that is one way to describe the condition that a visionary poetry makes actual. To understand what is involved in this, it is useful to remember how this poetry differs from the epic and the novel.

The epic is a mode in which different personalities exist in their own right. It allows for distinct subjectivities, and even entirely different modes of experience, in conflict with each other. But the depth of its representation of inner life is limited by the fact that all these subjectivities are sucked into a realm of higher fate that determines, in the end, what can happen to them. The premise to a limitless exploration of individual or collective self-reflection and self-identity, in litera-

ture as in politics, is that there be no fixed limit to the penetration of external reality by the imagination and the will. Though constraints exist, they must be themselves transformable. Each episode in the contingent history of the reaffirmation or the breaking of these bonds must represent another turn in the subjective history of individuals and groups -- of who they are and how they understand themselves. In the epic, however, the individual and the society are broken on the wheel of a destiny that they cannot ultimately transform, and the impersonal fateful order of outward events is reflected inward in the untransformable quality of an individual character or a collective mission.

We see in Dante's Christian epic or its secular Renaissance counterparts a struggle to deepen the truth of subjectivity and to replace the crush of fate and character by the more open encounter of divine grace and human will. This deepening of subjectivity found support in the Christian heightening of the idea of the individual and in the personal character of divinity: toward a kind of God who is a person as well as a fate one can hope to have the sorts of relations that one has with persons. These relations that allow for rescue and breakthrough as well as for surprise. But it was only in the novel that an art form developed perfectly suited to the recognition of the otherness of other people. Such an art form could readily state a shared idea of society, an idea worked out in the relationships between actual individuals. To achieve a deeper acceptance of this otherness is the novel's astonishing moral effect.

With the near disappearance of the epic, the advent of the novel, and the displacement of narrative poetry, poetry itself lost any ready means by which to present the tension between subjectivities from a perspective external to any one of them. Other people matter insofar as their actions and existence leave a mark on the consciousness identified with the poet's voice itself. The visionary thrust in poetry transforms this loss of the power fully to represent other people into an opportunity. The poet's voice becomes more than the expression of stranded consciousness; it reaches toward a single undivided mind, able to see beyond the barriers among things in the world, because it can look upon the world with the collected powers that are normally defracted among many minds. The barriers between subjectivities are relativized together with the divisions among states of affairs in the world. This is the poetry of a universal human identity.

The other parallel theme in a visionary poetics is the theme of the enlargement of human faculties and, above all, of the powers of imagination and will. The human person speaking through the poet's voice is enhanced. He moves in the direction of an ecstatic experience in which will and imagination join. They emancipate the self from everything that belittles it, from the experience of its own inertia, and from the sense of the impenetrability and recalcitrance of things. This enlargement of the human powers goes beyond the idea, common to epic and tragedy, of participation in great events that lift men out of the ordinariness of life. The empowerment of the acting and observing self, which the poem expresses and invokes, no longer depends

upon the performance of any particular role in some fateful conflict. The quality of enhancement extends from the self to the world, which now appears, in truer character, in all its freshness and its violence, "as on the first day." A single force of being radiates through self and world and through the actual chant of the poem. The world can then be grasped, simultaneously, in unity and difference.

The two themes of the visionary direction in poetry translate into each other. The enhancement of the faculties ultimately liberates the imagination and will from the limitations and sufferings of any particular self. The condition of movement toward a universal human identity is one in which all the human powers are being progressively intensified -- just as the society that goes beyond any rigid structure of hierarchical and communal divisions advances in the power experimentally to recombine and reconstruct its forms of association, for practical or moral ends.

Even after poetry has undermined all genres and metric patterns, it is still never entirely dominated by the visionary element. A visionary poetics necessarily has something barbaric and inhuman. It is barbaric because it denies not only the authority but the reality of all articulated social distinctions -- distinctions upon which, whatever their content, any civilization must depend. It is inhuman because it ignores the separateness and the fragility of the self, and its real experiences of loss, lament, and yearning. A poetry that had surrendered entirely to the visionary intention would be possible only among men who lived in the wrecks or the beginnings of a civilization or who

were bent on rejecting the truth about themselves.

For these reasons, there always has to be counter-visionary direction in poetry. It is concerned not just with the inability to reach the condition of one mind in one world, but with the failure to establish any kind of communication at all: poetry, which outside its epic and narrative forms, has such difficulty representing different selves in the full bloom of their differences, can easily express either the progress toward unity of mind or the falling back into a condition of an enclosed and unreachable subjectivity. The countervisionary element in poetry seizes on an experience of man on the verge of losing the unity and the continuity of the self. The moment of wonder is followed by the abashment rather than the enhancement of the human faculties. The chant is then a song of longing and lament rather than a celebration of triumphal communion with the forces at work in the world.

The visionary and the countervisionary directions, so defined, are certainly present in all literature. But they are present, for the most part, as conditions of extremity that define the outer boundaries within which the normal life of human encounter can move. Because of its special difficulties of representation and powers of language, poetry moves quickly toward these images of extremity even when they are balanced against each other in some precarious way. The advance becomes more relentless as all rigid distinctions of poetic mode or manner are swept away.

Both the content and relative force of these two contrasting directions in poetry can be elucidated by a pair of theological comparisons.

The condition of unified identity and enhanced power has a close kinship to religious ideas of salvation and heaven, just as the countervisionary focus on the isolation and disintegration of the self invokes the ideas of damnation and hell. In fact, the poetic movement is crucially ambiguous in just the way that the theological ideas often are. The ambiguity lies in whether, and in what sense, the individuality of the self, and the real differences among things in the world, are sustained or destroyed in the ecstatic moment. (Witness the complex adversary relation of mystical countertraditions to dominant orthodoxies in some of the major salvation religions.) But there is the difference in poetry. There the countervisionary insight is also a moment of sanity and recognition. It holds the imagination and the will back from the very illusions of unity and omnipotence that might keep them from real acts of communication and self-transcendence.

The visionary and the countervisionary, however, are not equally close to the central nature of poetry. The former -- it will turn out -- is more directly rooted in the very relationship of poetry to language. It is the major movement of poetic creation, even perhaps in those periods where the overt content of poetry seems to be much more occupied with countervisionary anguish and sorrow.

The relationship between the two is like that between faith and doubt for the believer. Doubt is an experience that clings to the faith because it arises continually from an element in faith itself:

the response of accepted vulnerability to some extraordinary visitation, intimation, or demand has a quality of unjustifiability. The scandal of the response echoes the scandal of the revelation. The freedom of denial persists, together with the incapability of proof.

In the poet's mind, the very movement toward the enhancement of human faculties and the unity of mind in an undivided world presupposes an acute consciousness of limitation and division. Division and limitation continue to be present, if only as possibilities of reversal, in the most triumphal moments of vision and renewal. The comparison with the relationship of doubt to faith, in the mind of the believer, cuts deep. In both instances, the central difficulty lies in the relationship between an ordinary condition of subjectivity and an effort to press beyond it. The experiences of the former and its standards of judgment are constantly both invoked and repudiated in the course of the latter.

There is a special difficulty when the context of the relationship between the visionary and the countervisionary is people's longing for each other. The lyrical modes of poetry depend upon a delicate opposition between two thrusts. The sense of need and loss is balanced against the hope or the memory of fulfillment. Love brings about its own experience of larger identity and enhanced power because it breaks the sense of an insoluble conflict between my need for other people and the jeopardy in which they place me. At any moment, the relations among individuals that make mutual acknowledgment and love possible are threatened by both the visionary and the countervisionary movements. One of the ways in which lyrical poetry tends to differ from the novel is that, in the lyric,

the fragile human encounter is seen as a place where things are always on the brink of getting out of hand in either of these two directions, and this awareness discloses very suddenly the unlimited quality of people's mutual longing and fear.

Now consider what poetry does to language, and, through language, to affect and meaning. It is best to begin by approaching this idea of the formative techniques of poetry as an another definition of what poetry is and only later to analyze its relationship to a definition that invokes the ideas of the visionary and the countervisionary. In this way, the risk of foreclosing some more capacious view can be lessened. The connections that do emerge between the insights and the techniques of poetry will be all the more striking.

Poetry works through a series of dissociations in the structure of language, affect, and meaning. To understand these dissociations, in detail and in their relationship to each other, is another and a less controversial approach to the central nature of poetry. The minimal outline of such a view might go like this.

The dissociation in language begins with the contrast between the natural word order of spoken speech and some alternative ordering. The primitive basis of this alternative ordering is the rhythmic chant ready to break into song. Poetry may come to dispense even with rhythm. It will then still emphasize principles of ordering that supplement or disturb the standard phrase structure.

A recurrent feature of this alternative order is the multiplication of equivalences in sound and meaning between words in

equivalent positions, whether the equivalence of position is determined by phrase structure or by some literary convention. These equivalences have many superimposed effects. They mark rhythm, insofar as poetry is rhythmic. Through rhythm, they exercise an incantatory influence. They draw attention to the language itself. They deny language its ordinary character as a transparent medium that might convey the same message in different words, differently placed. The actual speech, in its unique order, now becomes something decisive and irreplaceable. Finally, the equivalences may create a penumbra of extended meaning. They may do this by suggesting some hidden set of kinships not directly revealed by the ordinary sense of the words. Or they may do it by creating doubt as to the way in which the phrase should be translated into the different or fuller order of standard speech.

All these effects depend upon a shared pattern of linguistic dissociation. A preexisting order -- the order of everyday discourse -- will be shifted, concentrated or broken. Another one will appear alongside it. As a result, the idea of language as a given gets unsettled. Even in the most self-conscious and least convention-bound times, people will wonder how far this reconstruction can go without dissipating significant speech in a feast of sounds and images.

The dissociation of affect is the disentanglement of emotions (taking emotion in a conventional sense that a later part of this study will attempt to revise) from their usual objects in the surrounding society. The relationships marked by passion are those in which one person, or, by extension, some aspect of nature or

society, can no longer appear to another as simply a means or an obstacle to the realization of ends. The other's existence bears crucially, for good or ill, upon his own, by jeopardizing or confirming his own being. To the extent that it jeopardizes, you experience a sense of blockage: the drive for self-assertion comes into conflict with the acknowledgment of the presence of the other. To the extent that it confirms, the presence of the other and your acceptance of him is seen, and lived, as an enlargement of the opportunity for self-assertion. The will and the imagination are, in some measure, encouraged and unbound.

In the ordinary experience of social life, the range of events and encounters that serve as occasions for passion and the intensity of emotional life itself are severely limited. The content of emotional life is constrained and routinized by a set of widespread preconceptions about the significance and the possibility of different kinds of encounters and experiences. These ideas amount to a transaction between the established maxims and structures of society and the emergent facts of sensibility and conflict that this official order denies.

In poetry, the accumulated constraints upon passion are shaken: through the intensification of ordinary experience, or the fixing of passion upon objects that are usually out of bounds to it, or the surprising combination of significant possibilities of response. In all these ways, some sense is conveyed of the power of emotion to supersede and, by superseding, to recreate the order that previously seemed to contain it. This dissociation of passion from its ordinary context begins, in poetry, with the attitude toward language itself. What was viewed as a deliberate tool or a trans-

parent and even unconscious medium of communication now becomes an object of fascination and power in its own right.

The dissociation of meaning consists in a presentation of reality that shows how relationships that are ordinarily understood as separate overlay each other and merge in a more complete view of things. This result is achieved by the ordering of images, an exploitation of ambiguity, and a direct suggestion of equivalences and contrasts, disclosed in the language itself, rather than by some explicit course of reasoning and generalization.

In science, understanding progresses through a willed abstraction that sets aside many aspects of a reality until, at a later stage, they too can be accounted for some underlying, contertuitive picture of how things work. The ultimate ambition is to explain how every facet of our sense experience can ultimately be explained by some hidden manifold. But all the theories that can actually be produced, along the way toward this hypothetical goal, will represent a more or less abrupt departure from some aspect of common sense perception. Scientific theories deal with more abstract, less richly defined and contextualized entities or relations. They leave some part of the original perception provisionally unexplained.

The poetic dissociation also implies a wrenching out from some conventional way of looking at things. It moves, however, toward the impacting of entities and relationships upon each other. The original vision is filled up and altered, rather than emptied out and then derived from something else. It is as if the laborious work of science had been short-circuited, and its imaginary goal had become a living, sensuous reality. So here

it is clearer than ever that dissociation -- whether of language or meaning -- involves a reassociation. The poet hopes that this reassociation will be more powerful and more true than the association he had started out with.

The dissociation of meaning connects with the dissociation of language. The transpositions and equivalences of language serve to express the impacting of relationships. So does the fact that there may be several, slightly different everyday-language orderings into which the ordering of the poetic line could be translated. The disturbance of meaning also links up with the dissociation of affect. The reordering, or the convergence, of relationships is the general form of the process by which the range, or intensity, or significance of emotion is enlarged.

All the modes of dissociation serve the intentions of visionary poetry. They do this less as instruments of some independently defined objective than as a prefigurement, by their nature, of the visionary and the countervisionary experiences. By a momentum of their own, they move toward visionary insight and experience. Or they express the episodes of reversal and loss that may happen in the course of that movement.

First, the system of dissociations underlines the theme of the enhancement of human faculties. The advance in power manifests itself in the ability to reorder the elements of language, emotion, and meaning. The imagination and the will come together in a single activity of deconstruction and reconstruction. This activity penetrates and reshapes the order that seems most basic and therefore most recalcitrant to the mind. The experience of

enhanced power begins in the primitive basis of poetry. Language, which was a mere medium, something there as if from nature and learned from birth, suddenly becomes song.

At the same time, the strategies of dissociation break down the partitions that keep us from advancing toward the state of a single mind in a single world. They do this in two ways. The recognition of subjectivity and the secure distinction between one self and the others depend upon some stable context of language, emotion, and meaning. The many elements that enter into that context define the conditions of intersubjectivity: the conditions through which one person expresses himself to another and, by the give and take of probing and response, acquires, over time, a sense of his own self. The techniques of dissociation destabilize this context and suggest that it can be indefinitely disordered and reordered. They, therefore, also tend to relativize the felt distinction between selves, a distinction that can be no more solid than the elements needed to make it out. Besides, the techniques of dissociation hold the promise of a knowledge that reaches toward inclusiveness without abstraction and that tries to free itself from the partiality of an isolated mind.

When you consider the strength of the linkage in poetry between the modes of dissociation and the forward visionary movement, you can understand how poetry may extend and connect central themes in politics and science. In the history of politics, we see played out the relationship between established or available forms of social life and the as yet unrealized, undiscovered, or impracticable opportunities of association. Through collective conflict, driven forward by material rivalry and prophetic

insight, these possibilities may come to be discovered and realized. As the indefinite quality of social opportunity comes into active awareness, all our ideas of individual or collective human identity are also shaken out of any fixed social context, and rendered indefinite or relative. We assert our wills and the imagination over the social forms of existence. We can imagine the visionary movement in poetry as the anticipation in some present mode of experience of the most radical conceivable extension of that political movement, an extension so radical that it could never in fact be realized in history. This link through intentions between poetry and politics extends outward toward poetical and political means: collective conflict and invention do in politics what the techniques of dissociation do in poetry.

The kinship with science comes out more clearly, at the start, if we focus on these techniques and, especially, on the dissociation of meaning. The ultimate scientific goal of an inclusive understanding that departs from commonsense experience without failing to do it justice is present in the visionary aspect of poetry as an already realized achievement. This tie through the forms of poetic and scientific construction can be generalized to include the ambitions of science and poetry. For science also is driven forward by the ideal of a Laplacean mind, no longer confined to partial causal links but capable of making the final connections. It wants to be the liberated will and imagination standing before a newly revealed nature. It wants it even when our scientific knowledge, at any given time, seems to make this aim illusory.

When poetry is born forward by the visionary movement, it can be seen as an attempt to achieve, here and now, some intimation of that point where the final motives of politics and science are taken so far into the distance that they converge. Poetry is utterance not just about particular forms and possibilities of association, but about the very condition of subjectivity, a condition that defines itself through utterance. It is not just the utterance of particular recombinations for the sake of scientific or political invention; it is recombination for the sake of utterance.

Nevertheless, our awareness of these extraordinary claims that poetry makes upon us is counterbalanced by the knowledge of two kinds of limits that seem inseparable from the nature of poetry and become the more inseparable as the poet abandons epic or narrative modes and faces openly the contrasting pull of the visionary and the countervisionary. Each of these limits corresponds to one of the visionary themes I described at the outset.

There is the issue of objectivity. We do not know for sure when the poet's statement represents some real measure of escape from the partial, subjective voice and when, on the contrary, we are mistaking submission to the poet's alien subjectivity for access to a larger reality. The texture of questioning and response that marks normal discourse has been interrupted. An assault is underway, sustained by all the techniques of dissociation, against our faculties of judgment. This is power, though unarmed, though turned against itself through the poet's countervisionary commitment, or though undermined by his plain weakness of inspiration.

Then is the matter of poetry's relationship to the society in which it exists and to the people whose attention it engages. We may do everything within reach to deprive it of its religious and mythical aura, to demystify its techniques of construction and to integrate it with the political experience of a people. It will still remain a more or less exceptional event among the distractions of life. It is exceptional both in its making and in the reach of its visionary and countervisionary disclosures. When the moment of utterance and response passes, what truly is left of the experience of enhanced human powers? The problem is not that this question has a negative answer but that it has no clear answer at all. The relationship of poetry to everyday life, even when it scrupulously avoids the ecstatic, is as contestable and suspicious, and as pliable to deception and self-deception, as its breaking down of the walls between separate identities.

The total understanding and judgment of poetry as utterance and insight requires us to keep in view not only the contrast between the visionary and the countervisionary movements but also the relationship of poetry's powers to its limits.

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