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Notes of an Outsider

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THE TEARSTAIN TEST

According to Thomas Moore, the manuscript of one of Byron's poems written to the wife he had separated from, with great scandal, was "blotted all over with the marks of tears." Years later, when the original draft was offered at auction, Ernest Hartley Coleridge, son of the poet, had a chance to examine the manuscript. To his great disappointment he could find no tearstains at all.

Question: Would the poem have been any better had he found them?

A PERSONAL NOTE

The leaves are falling; so am I. [Landor]

Here the note of the personal merges with and becomes inseparable from the impersonal convention.

Generations later, same theme:

Rotting Ginsberg, I stared in the mirror naked today
I noticed the old skull, I'm getting balder
my pate gleams, etc., etc.

Here whatever of the impersonal was left in the theme has been swallowed up in the merely personal. It is probably funnier than intended.

HOW TO MANUFACTURE AN IMAGE

In Prinzhorn's book on the paintings of the mad a patient is quoted: "The head is made up of a 42 cm. shell [the largest German shell of WWI] which turns into a Papal tiara and finally into a magnificent pile of straw." Would anyone be surprised to find in a poem published tomorrow a line running something like this?—"the explosive head, a tiara, a pile of straw." Or more strictly in the current manner: "the head exploding like a tiara of straw." If anything, it makes almost too much sense.

THE WILD GARDEN

Organic form as a doctrine seems to demand an almost religious act of assent, and as a doctrine it has won almost universal acceptance in our superannuated Romantic age. It seems to imply, vaguely—and I have always found it vague as well as evangelical—that, in poetry, that poem will be best which springs up naturally, rather like a flower, I suppose, or a weed. And without any acknowledged necessity for preparing the ground with tools, for enriching it with fertilizer, for judicious pruning, clipping, or grafting. The result is a flower—I mean a poem—which will bear witness to its own naturalness, its organic character, just by virtue of the absence of all marks reflecting similitude and kind, marks such as symmetry, repetitive and predictive numerical features or patterns (such as the leaves of trees and bushes, for example) by means of which in the botanical world we identify genus and species. In short, the poems growing out of such a doctrine are less likely to bear marks of the generic than of the individual, since each is ideally a species unto itself, without kin—and therefore in this way quite against nature. Imagine the chaos of such a garden, the mad variety of so wide a field!

The organicist wishes to assert a beguiling but false claim to identity with something beyond or other than himself, to become, as it were, another of the non-human but sometimes expressive voices of nature, like the very thunder, say.

A CASE OF TRANSLATING ONESELF

A minor literary curiosity: two versions of the same little epigram, one in English, one in French, and I cannot tell which is the original, which the translation. What makes it a curiosity is that the same author—Landor—wrote both.

Ye walls! sole witnesses of happy sighs,
Say not, blest walls, one word.
Remember, but keep safe from ears and eyes
All you have seen and heard.

*O murs! témoins des plus heureux soupirs,
N'en dites mot: gardez nos souvenirs.*

Probably the English version came first, since English was Landor's native tongue, yet I happen to prefer here the "translation," if that is what it is.

The case does suggest to me that the same "content"—not precisely the same, but very, very close—may be carried by structures (forms?) very different, different in important ways.

THE ECONOMICAL VERSION

Landor again.

Ternissa! you are fled!
I say not to the dead,
But to the happy ones who rest below:
For surely, surely where
Your voice and graces are
Nothing of death can any feel or know.
Girls who delight to dwell
Where grows most asphodel
Gather to their calm breasts each word you speak:
The mild Persephone
Places you on her knee,
And your cool palm smooths down stern Pluto's cheek.

This is very brief and I find it very beautiful. Yet I am pretty sure that I spot evidences of padding. Let's see what happens if I cut each line down by one metrical foot.

You are not fled
Unto the dead
But to the happy ones below:
For surely where
Your graces are
Nothing of death can any know.
Now they who dwell
With asphodel
Grow calmer with each word you speak:
Persephone

Upon her knee
Takes you, to smooth stern Pluto's cheek.

Essentially the same argument, still recognizably the Landor style. My wild guess is that the poem was originally written in lines like these, of two and four feet, down to the last line, which turned out so well as a pentameter that the poet cheerfully rewrote the poem backwards, so to speak, padding skillfully along the way, and all for the sake, at least to start with, of the slow and stately Pluto line.

The true version is clearly superior to my reduction, suggesting, among other things, that the severest economy is not always in the interest of beauty and expressiveness. The point is obvious enough, though I have heard it argued the other way, to my astonishment. (The teacher who urged his students to drop all articles from their poems in the interest of economy, for instance.)

No predetermined meter seems to have been essential here. What seemed to count was a series of small, nice, tactful accommodations of phrase, line, and argument to one another, a sort of moment-to-moment feeling out of the way quite similar to what occurs in the writing of much free verse. The lines were tested not against a measure or limit fixed and specified in advance—which is what the anti-traditionalist automatically finds himself claiming—but against the very idea of measure itself. What was called for was not an *exact* measure, but *an* exact measure.

THE VISITING CRITIC

We were so appalled by the lecture—one of those in the provinces for which the distinguished lecturer has failed to make adequate preparation—that we did not go to the party afterward.

Looking over my notes I find that he seems to have said at one point, "Words like meanings are somehow cut loose from one another." He may have said *feelings* or meant *feelings* rather than *meanings*, but from his alcohol-slurred speech I gathered *meanings*. Perhaps it hardly matters, for once these are cut loose, whatever they are, they seem to "whirl around in a flurry" within a—I did not quite catch what the lecturer said here but I think it was the *void*, if the void has flurries. The void, I suppose, hath no flurry like a meaning spurned.

Also I heard, endlessly repeated—rather like the image of the ocean spliced into that camp classic, *The Loves of Isadora*, in order to patch over the numerous gaps in continuity—the abominable catch phrase, *Syntax is bogus!* This, mind you, in a fairly passable syntax, given the rather improvisational character of the critic's remarks. Presumably he meant that syntax was bogus for the "modernist" spirit in literature. Well, that is simply not so. It's bogus perhaps for some disturbed patients, for some children, for some poets even. Alas. And for some literary critics, although not so much in their own speech and writing as in what they read and choose to praise.

In any case, an orderly syntax is not equivalent—as this critic claimed—to believing that the world itself possesses an order, certainly not a benign order. I employ syntax even now to disclaim such a faith.

LITTLE OSSIANS

One side effect of an age of translation like ours is that the image is elevated to a role of supreme importance in our native poetry, since the image proves far easier to translate than, say, the rhythms of the original. It is as if our American poets, upon reading Homer, had all become little Ossians. It is as if poetry were now written in an international language, like music, but unfortunately not musical.

SELF-HATRED IN THE ACADEMY

Critics tend to feel comfortable with a poetry of ideas—that is, explicit ideas. It gives them something to talk about.

Failing ideas, look for critics to fall for the avant-garde. Best, of course, when the two are combined, as in the work of Charles Olson. I mean that department of the avant-garde—the largest, perhaps—whose works are notable chiefly for being practical demonstrations of a theory. Are we back to ideas after all? Academic critics in particular seem susceptible. How many in the academies bravely espouse the avant-garde, especially yesteryear's!

This happens to be true of academic critics of new fiction as well. The darlings of this set are the so-called experimentalists. Why this should have come to pass in the last decade or so I cannot guess, but it was not

always so. On the contrary, when I was a student, distressingly to the contrary. The pendulum has swung too violently back in the other direction now, though, and I can only suggest a paradox, to account for it, by way of partial explanation: The academic critic scorns any new work which does not attack the academy!

PLATONIC SCRIPTS

I write or try to write as if convinced that, prior to my attempt, there existed a true text, a sort of Platonic script, which I had been elected to transcribe or record.

WHERE DID FREE VERSE COME FROM?

Free verse in long lines has long been thought to come from the King James Bible and Walt Whitman, at least in English. Probably in other European languages something of the same thing. (Laforgue's translations of Whitman in 1886 for Gustav Kahn's *La Vogue*—just about the time *vers libre* was being defined, if not actually invented, in French.) To this as a source I think we ought to add the classic blank-verse line, and perhaps by extension the standard heroic line of the other languages. Looking at Apollinaire's "Zone," for instance, one still finds many alexandrines, often with the caesura displaced, a sort of mobile caesura, which tends to weaken the traditional character of the twelve-syllable line. In Eliot's early verse also this "memory" of the past continues, but brokenly, and here and there whole lines of blank verse remain intact (as in "Mr. Apollinax").

But what of free verse in short lines? In French, in some of the "Choses" by Guillevic, for example, it seems one can quite plainly see—and hear—bits and pieces of alexandrines, often halves or thirds in a row, making up whole twelve-syllable groups, and this to such an extent as to make for an apparent if erratic patterning. If this is so—and taking the possibility as a clue—one may suppose that the short line in English (which is to say, American) free verse came originally from a breaking up of the old blank-verse line, conscious or not, into smaller, varying units. Considering only the accents in a good deal of this early free verse, we find the lines turning out to vary usually between two

and three accents—that is, the old heroic line broken into two almost equivalent pieces. This possibility ought to be added to the more familiar suggestion that such a line stems historically from the practice of the Imagists, H.D. in particular.

PAGES FROM UNWRITTEN BOOKS

Some poems these days resemble those passages in novels when the narrative slows or ceases, allowing the hero time to reflect or to reach some sort of psychological conclusion or moral decision. With this vast difference, however—that in the novel there is an amplitude of context and we are expected to be acquainted with a certain background the novelist has conscientiously provided, to recognize references to details of setting, other characters, events that have gone before, etc., whereas in the type of poem I am thinking of we are likely to be deprived of any recognizable and knowable context. It is as if so much of what in a novel gives us that sense of the wholeness of life had been drained away, as well as the pleasures of recognition and the privileges of understanding, leaving only a sort of pure and rarefied psychological essence for contemplation. The rather elementary form of mysteriousness which results is distinctly not an advantage, though perhaps confused with true mystery and therefore praised by some.

Thus many poems these days read like incomplete novels—pages torn from lost or unwritten books.

There is perhaps a little more to be said about the sheer *prose* of poems now. The secrets of the rhythms of free verse seem to have been lost to a whole generation nearly. It is as if the old and young had been playing a game of Gossip—in which the whispered “secrets,” being passed on, had undergone curious warpings. Or are poets just not interested anymore?

MEASURE

Measure objectifies.

ON MUMBLING IN POETRY

The Actor's Studio style of acting—popular in the forties and fifties, and represented vividly still in my mind by Brando's performance in *Streetcar*—was the antithesis of everything British on stage. Mumbles, grunts, scratches. This style became accepted as a theatrical means of *imitating* natural behavior and a certain sincerity. It was opposed to an earlier theory of eloquence, according to which the actor in his role was expected to speak at a higher pitch of emotion nowhere more than just before his heroic death, as it might be. So with Othello on the point of death, as Eliot for one has pointed out. And this surely would have been understood—note the acceptance in law of deathbed testimony—as the moment of greatest “sincerity” as well. Now, however, sincerity may even be thought to be proved by little more than an inability to articulate. If the emotion which finds expression in whole and well-rounded sentences becomes suspect, what about the verse of Shakespeare?

There may be an analogy to this in the decay of meters after WWII. As the Actor's Studio style swept the country, so did various types of free verse. (Anti-British, too, by the way, under the banner of Dr. Williams.) Mumbles and grunts? Well, sometimes it does seem that way. I like it myself, for certain things; no denying its interest, its appropriateness on occasion, the welcome relief of such deflations. But taken as the very sign of the sincere and deeply felt? Spare me the paradox.

THE DYING PLEASURES OF MOVIE CRITICISM

I realize now that one of the reasons my serious interest in the movies—a lifelong passion, really (which probably dates back to watching *The Jazz Singer* from my mother's knee)—revived in the late sixties was that I began to read film criticism, not professionally but casually, for pleasure. I was no longer able to find so pure and uncompromised a pleasure in reading literary criticism, which in adolescence I had often been actually thrilled by. Some of it had been damned good, in fact. Now I was bored and in some cases actively offended by it; it seemed vague and to me quite irrelevant (by which I mean that it talked about things that as a writer I never thought of or acted on). The literary review was showing less and less of a sense of history (even of recent history).

Received opinions developed instantly, were held unanimously, and remained unexamined. Worst of all perhaps, there was a dreadful party spirit abroad. Reviewers had always puffed their friends (Jarrell on early Lowell) and picked fights with enemies, real or imaginary. And I know that there must always have been and always will be a certain amount of propagandizing and browbeating, but one may be excused all the same for growing weary of the pronouncements of a Bly or the personal unpleasantness of the *Georgia Review* houseman or the condescensions of unfledged Ivy Leaguers in *Poetry*.

Movie criticism seemed an altogether happier realm to escape to. Even the reviewers seemed to love their work and treated the movies—at least the movies of the past, including honorable failures—with affection and respect. Furthermore, they delighted in acquiring a great deal of information about what they were writing of and in putting that information to work for them. None of this was any longer true of the reviewers of new poetry or, with an exception or two, of the handful who over the next decade were to attempt books on the subject. I have made the experiment of interchanging the praise for poem A with the disdain for poem B expressed by the same reviewer in the same review; I could not see that one was more appropriate or exact than the other. An interchangeable criticism for interchangeable poems!

But structuralism has crept into movie criticism of late, the dead hand of the academy. And even a reviewer for the popular press like Pauline Kael sounds as shrill as if she were reviewing poetry. Gary Arnold and Andrew Sarris are exceptions still, I think. But on the whole movie criticism is just no fun anymore.

Yet I seem to need a little criticism mixed into my general reading diet, and lately I find myself dipping into art criticism, in which thankfully I do not yet know my way. I do find it comforting that the art critics and reviewers seem to have looked at the pictures first and to be capable of describing them and making distinctions among them, sometimes even commenting on technical matters far beyond me but of great interest all the same. It's refreshing. I am strangely encouraged to look at more pictures myself. Oh, I already see party spirit here, uninformed though I am, but, as I say, that does seem always to be around the fringes of the arts. Still, if art criticism should eventually fail me, I may have to settle in the end for the criticism of rock music. What my son tells me of that sounds promising.

ON LINE LENGTHS

One day in the early sixties, calling on my friend Mark Strand, I noticed in his typewriter a piece of paper on which a poem was apparently being revised. Other people's revisions always have a mysterious look about them, and I asked exactly what he was trying to do. The reply was that he was trying to get the lines to come out "even," all about the same length, so that they would look right.

However obvious this notion may seem to others it had never occurred to me before. In any case, I immediately saw the point and considered that I had learned something.

Seven or eight years later, calling again on the same poet, I noticed in the same typewriter a new poem, also apparently being revised, but with quite a different look about it even so. I found myself asking the same question as before, but this time the reply was not the same. It seems he was trying to *keep* the lines from coming out even!

This was my second lesson.

There must be a third.