

RHYME AND REASON

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A POEM provides an enclosed domain for investigation, challenging the critic to discover how it is constructed, how its formal structure is related to the complex effect it gives, how metrical means are related to poetic ends. Although kinship of form provides the critic with a positive basis for comparison in the treatment of different poems, the emphasis seems now to have shifted from the study of a poem's shared and inherited qualities to the study of what is distinctive or typical of the age in which it is written; as a result, little attention is paid to the diversity of poetic forms—distinct, vital and active in themselves—working in the minds of many different poets independently, towards the same kind of poetic result.

Yet the fixed poetic forms and prescribed measures have a sort of philosophic beauty of their own. The poet must commit his feelings to their determination within some chosen form. The nature of his material sets a problem to be solved, and the solution is the poetic ordering of that material: he will, therefore, imagine each effect in relation to the technical means necessary for its accomplishment, by so distributing his rhymes, for example, that the emphasis derived from rhyme in one part is exactly neutralized by a similar concentration upon another.

The subject-matter of a poem exercises a remote control over the poet's choice of words, and its form an immediate control, the metrical scheme tightening the interpretation of the grammar. Words have certain degrees of elevation in the scale of language. Sometimes the particular figure of the words is unimportant: but in poetry words are not replaceable by other words as they are in prose. Whereas in prose a given word might have been used otherwise, a word in its poetic context has a way of becoming quite magically endowed, and, as the organization of the poem becomes more complex, the possibility of substituting one word for another is proportionally reduced. Two rhythms can usually be detected in a poem, the underlying prose-rhythm and the superimposed verse-rhythm which is played off against it, diverging from or coinciding with it. Likewise there are two

meanings, the proportions of the one to the other varying with the kind of poem, ranging from simple ballad to elaborate lyric. These two meanings have been clearly distinguished by Wittgenstein:

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences, in the other something that is expressed only by these words in these positions.¹

If that which is to be communicated is the poem itself and not something other than the poem, the poem itself will provide the only vehicle capable of communicating the particular content that is the effect of its total pattern.

It is by analysing the effect of this total pattern that the critic can show how subject-matter and form, each subjected to the discipline of the other, are so wedded that *what* is to be said determines *how* it is to be said, so wedded as to beget a *necessary* rhyme, an inevitable conjunction of sound and meaning. If a bad poem says more than it means, a good poem generally means more than it says. The poet discovers words agreeing with a pattern which has power in itself to suggest some part of his meaning. And, as the Platonic 'forms' were said to transcend their instances, so, in a sense, might the abstract poetic forms be said to transcend theirs. Our sense-experience offers a series of more remote or closer approximations to an ideal limit, thus suggesting the ideal limit itself, and so also does our experience of poetry: it is, perhaps, this fact that accounts for the delight we take in metre, in sensing regularity just out of hearing, in continually referring what is heard to what is expected.

We may think of a poem as the formula for an irreducible experience, or, with Ezra Pound, as a sort of inspired mathematics which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, but for the human emotions; and, provided we remember that the language of poetry is not, like the language of mathematics, a closed system, but that it runs into a horizon of open possibilities—poetry itself being an ever-potent means of pushing back this horizon, of extending the limits of our language—nonetheless, we may find this analogy between poetry and mathematics suggestive of

1 *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 143-144 (8).

further points of resemblance. Bertrand Russell's remarks on the arrangement of numbers are strikingly applicable to the poet's arrangement of words:

When we say that we 'arrange' the numbers in these various orders, that is an inaccurate expression: what we really do is to turn our attention to certain relations between the natural numbers which themselves generate such-and-such an arrangement. We can no more 'arrange' the natural numbers than we can the starry heavens: but just as we may notice among the fixed stars, either their order of brightness or their distribution in the sky, so there are various relations among numbers which may be observed.²

Similarly, the poet turns his attention to certain relations between words which themselves generate such-and-such an arrangement: he discovers words agreeing with a pattern. And though, as compared with colours for instance, little may be known about the laws governing the effects of the admixture of words, yet the necessities or conditions of any art are, after all, the rules by which to try it; and in this connection our poets would do well to remember Arnold's unheeded plea in the Preface to the 1853 edition of his poems:

Let us, at least, have so much respect for our Art as to prefer it to ourselves; let us not bewilder our successors, let us transmit to them the practice of Poetry with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws, under which excellent works may again, perhaps at some future time, be produced, not yet fallen into oblivion through our neglect, not yet condemned and cancelled by the influence of their eternal enemy, Caprice.

² *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, chapter iv, p. 30.