

SOBER COLOURING

The Ontology of Super-Realism

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SUPER-REALISM, yes, because that is how I think of my fiction, quite deliberately and consciously, very likely unconsciously too. When I started to write novels and stories about the year 1956, I had no clear idea of what I was doing. I had had a literary education, and knew something about critical theory and method as applied to the work of other writers, the classics especially, and some moderns. I got a Ph.D. in English in late 1955. After that I did more or less what I wanted. I began to write independently, feeling liberated from the need to defer to what other people might think. I was glad to get out of the graduate school.

I had no theory of my own writing, and belonged to no school, so I wrote most of a novel which was never published, and a dozen stories, in 1956 and 1957, instinctively, making all the important artistic decisions as I went along, with no theoretical bias for one kind of writing as against all the others. Instinctively, then, I turned out to be a moral realist, not a naturalist nor a surrealist nor a magic realist nor in any way an experimental or advance guard writer. That was in effect where I began.

All my early writing dealt with the affairs of credible characters in more or less credible situations. As I look back, I see that this instinctive moral realism was tempered by an inclination to show these credible characters, in perfectly ordinary situations, nevertheless doing violent and unpredictable, and even melodramatic, things. A brother and sister go to visit their mother's grave and are unable to find it in a cemetery of nightmarish proportions; a man kills his

newly-baptized girl friend thinking that she will go straight to Heaven; a young priest molests a child sexually; a young boy goes mad under great strain. A yachtsman runs his boat on a rock and sinks it, drowning his wife and her lover, who are trapped below deck. I would never choose actions like these nowadays, not because of their violence but because of their improbability. I still write about intense feeling which leads to impulsive and sometimes violent acts, but I am better able to locate these feelings in credible occasions.

In those days, and for several years afterwards, I tried to control these melodramatic tendencies — murder, suicide, hanging about in cemeteries, drowning in burst boats — by a strong sense of the physical form of stories. I arranged my pieces according to complex numerologies. A novel might have seven main sections, one for each day of a specific week in a given year, so that the reader could tell exactly what time it was when something happened. Or the book might be divided in three main parts, each with a specific number of subdivisions. I once wrote the rough draft of a book in two main sections and when I had finished each half of the manuscript was precisely a hundred and forty-four pages long: twelve twelves doubled. This play with numbers is a recurrent feature of my work. *Around the Mountain* follows the calendar very precisely, with one story for each month from one Christmas to the next. I have always had a fondness for the cycle of the Christian liturgical year. My first, unpublished, novel was called *God Rest You Merry*, and covered the seven days from Christmas Night to New Year's Eve, in a most elaborate arrangement.

I still do this. My new novel, which will appear in the fall of 1972, *You Can't Get There From Here*, is in three parts. The first and third sections have ten chapters each; the middle part has twenty, which gives us: 10/20/10. The Christian numerological symbolism implied is very extensive. It makes a kind of scaffolding for the imagination.

I had then, and still have, an acute sense of the possibilities of close formal organization of the sentence, syntactically and grammatically, and in its phonemic sequences. I paid much attention to the difficulties of writing long sentences because I knew that simple-minded naturalists wrote short sentences, using lots of 'ands'. I did not want to be a simple-minded naturalist. I hoped to write syntactically various and graceful prose. I took care to vary the number of sentences in succeeding paragraphs. I rarely used the one-sentence paragraph; when I did so I felt mighty daring. I kept a careful eye upon the clause-structure of each sentence. I wouldn't use the ellipsis mark (. . .) because Arthur Mizener wrote to me that he considered it a weak, cop-out sort of punctuation.

I sometimes use the ellipsis now . . . and feel guilty.

My interest in the sound of sentences, in the use of colour words and of the names of places, in practical stylistics, showed me that prose fiction might have an abstract element, a purely formal element, even though it continued to be strictly, morally, realistic. It might be possible to think of prose fiction the way one thinks of abstract elements in representational painting, or of highly formal music. I now began to see affinities between the art I was willy-nilly practising and the other arts, first poetry, then painting and music. I have always been passionately attached to music and painting — I have gone so far as to marry a painter on mixed grounds — and have written many stories about the arts: film-making, painting, music less often because it is on the surface such a non-narrative art. I find that it is hard to speak about music.

I have also written some stories about a kind of experience close to that of the artist: metaphysical thought. My stories “A Season of Calm Weather” (with its consciously Wordsworthian title) and “The Hole” are about metaphysicians. The second of the two tries to show a philosopher’s intelligence actually at work, a hard thing to do. Like musical thought, metaphysical thought seems to take place in a non-verbal region of consciousness, if there is such a thing, and it is therefore hard to write about, but to me an irresistible challenge.

My novels *White Figure*, *White Ground* and *The Camera Always Lies* dealt respectively with the problems of a painter and a group of film-makers. It is the *seeing-into-things*, the capacity for meditative abstraction, that interests me about philosophy, the arts and religious practice. I love most in painting an art which exhibits the transcendental element dwelling in living things. I think of this as true *super-realism*. And I think of Vermeer, or among American artists of Edward Hopper, whose paintings of ordinary places, seaside cottages, a roadside snack bar and gasoline station, have touched some level of my own imagination which I can only express in fictional images. In my story “Getting to Williamstown” there is a description of a roadside refreshment stand beside an abandoned gas pump, which is pretty directly imitated from a painting of Hopper’s. I see this now, though I didn’t when I wrote the story. That is what I mean by the unconscious elements in my work which co-operate with my deliberate intentions.

I HAVE TO ADMIT at this point that my Ph.D. thesis discussed the theory of the imagination of the Romantic poets and its background. The

argument of the thesis was that Romantic imagination-theory was fundamentally a revision of the theory of abstraction as it was taught by Aristotle and the mediaeval philosophers. The kind of knowing which Wordsworth called “reason in its most exalted mood” and which Coleridge exalted as creative artistic imagination, *does the same thing* as that power which Saint Thomas Aquinas thought of as the active intellect. I do not think of the imagination and the active intellect as separate and opposed to one another. No more are emotion and thought *lived* distinct and apart. The power of abstraction, in the terms of traditional psychology, is not a murderous dissection of living beings; on the contrary it is an intimate penetration into their physical reality. “No ideas but in things,” said William Carlos Williams. I believe that Aquinas would concur in that — the idea lives in the singular real being. The intellect is not set over against emotion, feelings, instincts, memory and the imagination, but intimately united to them. The artist and the metaphysician are equally contemplatives; so are the saints.

Like Vermeer or Hopper or that great creator of musical form, Joseph Haydn, I am trying to concentrate on knowable form as it lives in the physical world. These forms are abstract, not in the sense of being inhumanly non-physical, but in the sense of communicating the perfection of the essences of things — the formal realities which create things as they are in themselves. A transcendentalist must first study the things of this world, and get as far inside them as possible. My story “The Hole” tries to show a philosopher working out this idea in his own experience. Here, as everywhere in my writing, I have studied as closely and intensely as I can the *insides* of things which are not me. The great metaphor in human experience for truly apprehending another being is sexual practice. Here, perhaps only here, do we get inside another being. Alas, the entrance is only metaphorical. In plain fact no true penetration happens in love-making. It is not possible for one physical being to merge into another, as D. H. Lawrence finally realized. Bodies occupy different places; there is nothing to be done about this. Sex is a metaphor for union, not itself achieved union.

What we are united to in this world is not physical insides of persons or things, but the knowable principle in them. Inside everything that exists is essence, not in physical space and time, but as forming space and time and the perceptions possible within them. What I know, love, and desire in another person, isn’t inside him like a nut in its shell, but it is everywhere that he is, forming him. My identity isn’t inside me — it is *how I am*. It is hard to express the way we know the forms of things, but this is the knowing that art exercises.

Art after all, like every other human act, implies a philosophical stance: either

you think that there is nothing to things that is not delivered in their appearances, or you think that immaterial forms exist in these things, conferring identity on them. These are not the only ontological alternatives, but they are extreme ones, and they state a classical ontological opposition. The bias of most contemporary thought has been towards the first alternative, until the very recent past. But perhaps we are again beginning to be able to think about the noumenal element in things, their essential and intelligible principles, what Newman called the “illative” aspect of being. The danger of this sort of noumenalism is that you may dissolve the hard, substantial shapes of things, as they can be seen to be, into an idealistic mish-mash — something I’m not inclined to do. I’m not a Platonist or a dualist of any kind. I think with Aristotle that the body and the soul are one; the form of a thing is totally united to its matter. The soul is the body. No ideas but in things.

That is where I come out: the spirit is totally *in* the flesh. If you pay close enough attention to things, stare at them, concentrate on them as hard as you can, not just with your intelligence, but with your feelings and instincts — with your prick too — you will begin to apprehend the forms in them. Knowing is not a matter of sitting in an armchair while engaged in some abstruse conceptual calculus of weights and measures and geometrical spaces. Knowing includes making love, and making pieces of art, and wanting and worshipping *and* calculating (because calculation is also part of knowing) and in fact knowing is what Wordsworth called it, a “spousal union” of the knower and the known, a marriage full of flesh.

I want to propose the Wordsworthian account of the marriage of the mind and the thing as a model of artistic activity. I don’t think that the Romantic movement failed. I think we are still in the middle of it. Of the Romantic masters, Wordsworth seems to me to have understood best how things move in themselves, how they exist as they are when they are possessing themselves, having their identities, living. Wordsworth has an extraordinary grasp of the movement, the running motion, of the physical, the roll of water or sweep of wind, changing textures of fog or mist, all that is impalpable and yet material. In this fleeting, running movement of physical existence, for Wordsworth there is always the threat of an illumination, “splendour in the grass, glory in the flower”. Things are full of the visionary gleam.

The illuminations in things are there, really and truly *there*, in those things. They are not run over them by the projective intelligence, and yet there is a sense in which the mind, in uniting itself to things, creates illumination in them.

The clouds that gather round the setting sun
 Do take a sober colouring from an eye
 That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;

This is a triple eye, that of the setting sun which colours the clouds, and that of the sober human moral imagination, and finally that of God as brooding, creative Father of all. The colouring of the clouds is given to them by the Deity in the original act of creation. Every evening the sun re-enacts the illumination. The moral imagination operates in the same way, though it is not originally creative; it projects colouring into things, true, but the colouring has already been put there by the divine creation. The act of the human knower is an act of reciprocity. It half creates, and half perceives "the mighty world of eye and ear".

"I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject," said Wordsworth, very justly. His regard to things is concentrated and accurate; he insists everywhere on the utter necessity of the sensory process, of seeing and hearing, of taking in the sensible world and transforming it. He proposes "to throw a certain colouring of the imagination over incidents and situations taken from common life." This is the same metaphor as that of the final stanza of the "Intimations Ode". The eye in seeing gives colour to things; but the colour is there.

The poetry of Wordsworth supplies us again and again with examples of this colouring of imagination spread over incidents and situations from common life. The figure of the old Leech-Gatherer in "Resolution and Independence" is perhaps the most overwhelming example of this capacity of very ordinary persons and scenes to yield, on close inspection, an almost intolerable significance.

In my mind's eye I seemed to see him pace
 About the weary moors continually,
 Wandering about alone and silently.

The concentrating eye, interior/exterior, giving to things their sober hues, is constant in Wordsworth. I have imitated it from him in my work. In the deliberately paired stories "Socks" and "Boots" I have chosen incidents from ordinary life and characters such as may be met with everywhere, and I have attempted to look steadily at these persons in the hope that something of the noumenal will emerge.

THESE STORIES ARE, to begin with, political; they are about the ways in which living in society modifies our personal desires, a very Wordsworthian theme. Domenico Lercaro in "Socks" does not want to work so hard. Nobody wants to work that hard. He doesn't want to work on a garbage truck or do snow removal, but he is driven to it by the need to survive. The fictional "my wife" in the story "Boots" wants to buy a certain specific kind of winter footwear, but the stores simply don't stock the boots she wants. We can buy only what we are offered, and our range of choice is surprisingly limited.

I have tried to move beyond the fiction of social circumstance by taking a very attentive look at my two main characters. In "Socks" poor Domenico sees the enormous, noisy, snow-removal machine turn before his eyes into a divine beast or Leviathan. Everyone who has seen these machines at work recognizes their intimations of violence, in their noise and in the sharpness of their rotary blades. They have actually killed and eaten people. Modern life is full of these mechanical beasts.

"My wife" in "Boots" feels trivialized by fashion; most women in middle-class circumstances do, I think. To wear high heels and a girdle is to enslave yourself — to adopt the badges of a humiliating subservience. This story tries to make its readers sense the galling limits on their activities felt by intelligent women in the face of the clothes which fashion and *chic* propose for them: the necessary sexual exhibitionism, the silly posturing, the faked little-girlishness.

The two stories insinuate larger issues than their subjects would suggest; they are following Wordsworth's prescription. I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subjects. I hope that my gaze has helped to light them up.

FOOTNOTES

¹ This essay also appears as the introduction to these stories in the forthcoming anthology *The Narrative Voice*, edited by John Metcalf and to be published by McGraw-Hill of Canada.