

# POETRY AS PRIMITIVE LANGUAGE

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A FRIEND of mine said he had been driving in the neighborhood of Memphis. The new highway was in places a sort of causeway built up above bayou water, and right at the base of it on one side an old Negro was fishing. Thinking that the water was too near the slag and the noise of the highway for this sport, my friend stopped his car and had the following conversation with the fisherman.

Good morning, Uncle, are you fishing?

Yessir, Cap'n, I'm fishin'.

Have you caught any fish yet?

Nossir, I ain't yet.

Have you had any bites?

Nossir, I don't believe I has.

Have you had any nibbles?

Nossir, I can't say I is.

Do you think there are any fish in that hole?

Cap'n, I don't much reckon there's any fish there nohow.

Well, Uncle, why do you keep fishing there?

Well, Cap'n, this is the hole I'se always done my fishin' in, 'cause that's my house right up yonder on the rise.

This anecdote has several possible morals, and I may have used it in the past to suit the occasion. The one I read from it today is the truest of all its meanings, and has to do with a spiritual affinity between the fisherman and Mr. T. S. Eliot of *The Waste Land*. The big new road symbolizes modernity. It had killed out the fish in this particular hole, but the old man went on

fishing there just the same. The fact is that fishing is not a single action like a science, but an ambiguous activity like an art. It means to take fish and be effective, just as poetry means to carry on a rational argument and say something. But it means also to sit on the ground, smell the water, watch the snakes and dragonflies, slap the mosquitoes, feel the sun and smoke a pipe—all of which together amount to a diffuse delicious context which goes with fish-taking, and parallels most precisely the splendid contextual detail of poetic language. But in the forms of modern life the colored man and Mr. Eliot have found it so hard to attach the old familiar contexts to the new effective actions that they have decided to take the contexts and let the effective actions go. Modern art tends that way. It does a pretty piece of fishing, and allows for all the business that belongs to fishing except the taking of fish.

Let that wait a moment. My topic is not the ineffectiveness but the primitivism of poetry, and they do not necessarily come to the same thing though sometimes they may. By primitivism I mean an antique or outmoded cast of thought, so that the poetry is likely to seem heroic as compared with contemporary thought, or to seem pastoral, agrarian, medieval, pre-Raphaelitish or merely old-fashioned and quaint. After some progress of civilization comes a movement of regress, with poets in charge of it.

But I have generally labored this point in large or philosophical terms, with the result that I seemed to myself profound but not very pointed, and academically correct but as a student of poetry not really close to the topic. Today in your honor I will talk about the primitive quality that appears in poetry as language. This version of critical theory is brand-new for me, and experimental, since I have not worked it out, but it seems more streamlined and presentable than any other I have hit upon. Literary criticism is not identical with philosophy at large, but it occurs to me that it may well be identical with linguistic. Or, if you prefer the term, it may be identical with semantic, one of the newest, most capable and sharpest of analytic tools. The advantage is that in applying it, whether to a poetry or to a science, you can uncover a lot of philosophical elements that belong to your topic, and escape from uncovering a lot of philosophical elements that do not belong to your topic. I am at the moment a sort of convertite to linguistic, and am trying to translate into its forms such theoretical notions as I have otherwise arrived at.

I have assembled my observations not too systematically under the head of a numerical series of Points. This is logically a bad style, but it is a fast one, and great statesmen have recommended it to your favor. I will not say how many Points appear in my notes, but they were too many; they greatly exceeded Fourteen. I have now reduced them slightly below that number. I proceed.

1. A primitive language is one whose standard discourse, in trying to be *conceptual* (or rational), is obliged also, and whether or no, to be *imaginal* (or substantial). That is, in trying to make useful formulations about things, relating them by virtue of some common or class property, it is obliged to refer to the many-propriety or substantial things themselves, the things as wholes. Primitive languages are sometimes called *radical* languages: they consist almost wholly in root words, each one de-

noting a whole thing or whole event. In discourse these roots are jumbled together, and it devolves upon the hearer to figure out the properties in which the things named are related, and by elimination to read into the jumble a consecutive argument. Here is the famous ambiguity of language. You still have it in poetic metaphor, for example, and in all unskillful speech. Does your metaphorical word refer to the single property which makes it logically fit for the argument, or does it also evoke an image and refer to the independent substance? Homer was fond of the wine-dark sea, and used the locution again and again; ostensibly he meant a shade of color, but incidentally his readers and singers were sure to receive a fleeting image of the substantial and very good thing named wine.

2. A language develops out of its primitive or radical condition in at least two ways. First, it improves its vocabulary, finding words which denote the several properties of the thing and not having to keep on denoting every time the whole manifold of properties which make up the substance—adjectives for the leading aspects of the thing, adverbs and highly restricted verbs for aspects of the event. They are relatively abstract, technical, scientific and useful. Second, the primitive language develops syntactically. It learns to place the parts of predication in a definitive order expressive of their relation; it invents inflections, prefixes and suffixes, and relational words like the conjunction and the preposition. It is improving the precision of discourse, and more and more squeezing imagination, which looks for its substantial images, out of the action. I do not mention as a syntactical development the device of compounding or hyphenating words; that is generally the crudest primitivism though poets are given to it, and it either antedates or repudiates the close syntactical articulation. In short, suppose an American Indian plenipotentiary, knowing his English only to the extent of a few root-words like those

of some primitive language, and treating with the white invaders, who know even less than that about his language, as follows: Heap big Indian hunting go, heap big paleface firewater come. Against its particular background this discourse might just be intelligible. But now conceive the plenipotentiary as having behind him a modern Indian's college studies and the whole recent development of the English language, and phrasing his proposition like this: The designated territories are obviously extensive and valuable, and my government would require in compensation for them a fully proportionate volume of distilled liquor of acceptable alcoholic content. But to phrase the bargain in this way seems to insult the intelligence of the party of the first part, and the honesty of the party of the second part, and we should remark that linguistic precision illuminates the values offered in a bargain, or anywhere else. I do not think poets, Indians, heroes, demigods or any other primitives could look out for themselves in a society whose advanced prose precision they could not master.

3. An advanced language is one in which the standard discourse is perfect or nearly perfect conceptually, and the imaginal or substantival range of meaning has all but disappeared. At this stage language conquers its involuntary ambiguity. It becomes fit for big business, technical science and all other abstract forms of thinking. This is the kind of language that seems exclusively to be coveted by some semanticists, such as Korzybski. Kenneth Burke wrote to me that all semanticists of his acquaintance were naturalists, meaning that they tolerated only discourse after the scientific ideal, and in his view were bad people; that is, they would like to impose this ideal upon all discourses regardless of its suitability. I for my part just now referred to conceptual discourse as the standard of language; and certainly, as language improves its prose, it approximates more and more to that standard; even if we include its literary prose. Sir Thomas Browne sustained his imagistic magnilo-

quence proudly as something that in his day would be set to the credit of a writer. It is significant that we have no Brownes today; but we do have for instance Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith whose phantasies are one sentence or at most several sentences long, whose mock-seriousness represents an author with tongue in cheek and who denominates his pieces as *Trivia*. But I think not all semanticists are uncompromising partisans of science for all occasions, and my acquaintance with them has been a little more fortunate than Mr. Burke's.

4. As a language develops, and discourse becomes more rigorously conceptual, and the imaginal fringe of substance is obliterated from view, poetry intervenes. Poetry recovers to language its imaginal or substantival dimension, almost as fast as language loses it, though of course not quite. That is probably what poetry is for, as nearly as we can state it. It is a special and artificial kind of discourse fighting for excuse to live in a society which has proscribed it. Naturally it might court the more primitive groups of this society and claim to speak their language, and Wordsworth offers a doctrine of poetry as the language of common men. But if it is not more regressive and braver in its diction than that it will not have for common men the value of a poetry, and on the whole I think it needs to be maintained that poetry has a value only for those who are familiar with the advancement of contemporary language and disaffected by the failure of its imaginal dimension. The imaginal dimension in language is something you did not know was there till it is gone, and then you turn to poetry in order to get it back. The primitive character of the poetic language will show, of course, in the radical quality of its terms and in the looseness of its syntax.

5. Our own present language is highly advanced, so that its prose standard enforces a conceptual purity that would be simply fabulous for a primitive mind. The need for poetry is probably all the more imperative. But evidently the difficulty is

greater than usual, perhaps greater than ever. It is harder to go primitive in your language when you are bred up to maintain its rationality; and at the same time it may be harder to palm poetry off upon a public that has come under an aggressive educational establishment and learned something about linguistic duty and linguistic destiny; the whole artifice of poetry becomes transparent, and a little shabby. What will the modern poet do? Mr. Eliot has advised him to "dislocate language" if necessary, and in his own verse has practiced many violences. That is a bold strategy, and does not appeal to the middling public which, from its casual acquaintance with older poetry, is not used to outraging the contemporary modes of discourse so recklessly. But Mr. Eliot is a wise man and a veteran of the wars, and we should not dismiss his counsel hastily. Poets appear to be faced with a crisis of language, the critical difficulty being that the imaginal element of language is now so slurred and abridged that there is not room enough in reputable discourse for poetry to begin its usual procedures.

6. The style of poetic discourse has always been outwardly loyal to the purpose of primitive language (indeed to the ruling purpose of any language) in preserving the impression of being a conceptual discourse intending to say something rather clear and useful. But now there appear exceptions: poems in which no binding argument is visible supporting the images of the poem. There are for example the poems of Eliot, of Hart Crane, of a school of surrealists, and there is the poetic prose of James Joyce. In France, where there is more consciousness of language than elsewhere, the exceptions began with the Symbolists far back in the nineteenth century. But in general these poems are highly modern, and still under question. I advert again to my colored fisherman who achieved the fishing without the fish: they are trying to provide the body of poetry without providing a skeleton to hold it together. On

the whole I think the tactic is wrong. But that does not mean that the situation is not desperate, and I hesitate to offer a general judgment because the poets may really be more subtle and penetrating than I am in their analysis of the poetic situation. I tend to take comfort from the example of William Butler Yeats. His understanding was deep, his strategy perfectly adventurous, so that he tried many experiments that failed; but I am very sure he found an area of language in which images and definitive arguments accommodated themselves to each other; I am not yet sure how big this area was and how much room remains there for further poetic farming.

7. Modern psychology seems to enforce Point 6; especially Gestalt psychology with its studies of the process of attention and the process of learning. I believe it admits scarcely any such thing as a pure image, that is, an image in which our attention diffuses equally upon all the properties. On the contrary, we achieve the image of a thing only in the process of recognizing the thing, and we recognize it by virtue of detecting in it some dominating surface-property or facet-property which is obviously valuable. We then apprehend the other properties of the image in a sort of *sub rosa* fashion, thinking we are engrossed or pretending to be engrossed still with the dominant property, but really rioting in that territory of the image which is relatively out of focus and forbidden. However, it remains true that we attend to the image by focusing it, and when it falls out of all focus we cannot attend to it. We get the fringe items by looking out of the corner of our eye; or we turn our eye straight on them but not for long. Such a technique is probably the one employed by poetry; a way of indirection, but perhaps the only way on earth of realizing the vividness, magnificence and beauty of the world. A psychology of poetry would work along these lines and show the devices by which poetry permits us to have this truancy without offending the public censor, or even the

Freudian censor who presides over our own consciousness. But the Freudian allusion may be misleading. I think the remarkable property of the poetic image, aside from its existence at all, is its innocence. There is no chance of accounting for poetic beauty as a libidinous gratification, nor even as something useful, nor even as something moral. Such accounts have been pushed hard and ingeniously but they have failed. But perhaps I do not need to declare to you that the poetic beauty survives all the failures of our crude analysis, and we continue to receive it after we confess that it cannot be isolated as easily as we had thought.

8. There is no primitivism in poetry so ubiquitous, so atmospheric, as the primitivism of its language, which is almost identifiable with the process of consciousness itself. But there are primitive characters in it more obvious than this; and for example that of its cosmology, theology or ideology. To be completely contemporary you must give up the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, and you must expurgate large tracts from the corpus of most of the famous poets and some of your favorite poets: because in respect of their ideas you come upon the primitive. Even in their own day they were prepared to commit anachronism. Think of the Christian poets who have restored the Olympian deities, and the Copernicans who have reverted to the Ptolemaic cosmos; a notorious infidelity on the part of the poets, and they must rate broadly and ideologically, as well as in ways much subtler and harder to remark, as apostates from our achieved culture. We are obliged to remark that there often appears in poetry precisely the mode of primitivism that has the official sanction of the religious establishments. Religion seems fundamentally to be a resistance to the purification of our cosmic conceptions, and in the face of progress a regression to beautiful but primitive dogmas. The new concepts are too pure and emasculated; the old dogmas registered better the contingent density of the actual

created world; the concept and the dogma stand for different modes of knowledge. Construed philologically (*religio* = a tying back), religion may be expected, when the issue is joined, to espouse the dogma against the concept. The poetic ideas may likewise show very well the general direction that poetry takes, but they are not strictly my topic. They are a topic for poetic criticism unquestionably, and we know that while it is easy to spot the ideas it is not easy to trace them with precision. But what is still harder, and of a more enveloping importance, and probably more fascinating, is the analysis of the poetic language.

9. Returning to language. It must not be supposed that the poetic regression is merely a matter of finding some actual historic idiom that is now archaic and outmoded. That would be a defiance comparable to the religious recital of the old dogma, but poetry lacks the support of a great institutional establishment to approve an overt defiance; so that would be too bold to succeed, and too simple and literal to rate as a technique. It is true that archaic diction figures in poetry, but it is also true, in my estimation, that the effect is bad. It is possible for poetry to cover up its tracks, and to seem contemporary without conforming to the level of conceptual attainment that is in vogue. Consequently it would be a poor critical project to plan, for example, to discover in the poetic diction of the eighteenth century a diction recovered bodily from the seventeenth century after the latter had vanished from eighteenth century prose. Poetry must preserve "face." It should sound contemporary, and with the accomplished poets I think it does; it even sounds felicitous, elegant and fashionable. This requires of the poet the greatest linguistic ingenuity.

10. The diction of fine poetry is always fresh and individual, but there are several broad techniques or strategies which poets have handed down to their successors since time immemorial. They have become

publicly licensed, and no public has been querulous enough to challenge them unless it is very recently. They make up the only objective institutional establishment there is for poetry to shelter under. I do not know what would happen to poetry if it should be deprived of them, and its tenuous establishment should collapse. I do not know what would happen, but perhaps there is a chance of my finding out before very long if there is no shift in the linguistic climate. They are rank solecisms, either by nature or by the extravagant manner of their practice. The first of these strategies is meter. It is a way of enforcing a phonetic imagery upon attention, which otherwise might be completely occupied with the semantic character, or meaning, of the words. That makes a dispersal of attention, enough by itself perhaps to be decisive and to convert reception into an aesthetic experience; the phonetic effect becomes a context round the semantic action. But it has a strange effect upon the semantic action itself which it is important to consider. The meter works upon the poet when he composes and alters his composition, and then it works upon the hearer and alters his sense of what he is reading. Look first at the poet. He is not quite free to use the words that express his intended meaning, because these do not automatically fall into the prescribed meter; so he must tinker with them, and try substitutions, till the meter has been realized and the meaning is not too remote. In this process the meaning gets loosened up. He has sacrificed the conceptual precision of his vocabulary, and the cogency of his syntax. If it was difficult to know how to escape from the bondage of a conceptual discourse, his metrical necessities have driven him to do just that, one little step at a time. And now observe the reader. I have observed the reader, many times, and professionally. I have observed that often the reader of a poetry that is perilously on the loose, imaginal and primitive side is unaware of the fact, because he

is fooled by the tidiness of the meter. It takes a reader from one of the science departments of the college to ignore the meter and dig into the obscurities of the discourse. The student from the science department has a harder head than one of our students and is useful to have on hand during poetic studies; but he is rather at the disadvantage of being committed to attending to one thing at a time; first the meaning, then the meter, hardly the two together. Perhaps he has lost his rugged primitive constitution and is effete. On the other hand the prejudice of the arts-trained student is all against picking a good thing to pieces; but his habit of taking the whole thing in stride exposes him to blind spots as to just what he is taking. You can hardly persuade him that the elaborate musical development in Swinburne for example, or even in Shelley, went along with, and indeed necessitated, a serious deficiency in the meaning.

11. Another licensed poetic convention, whose loss poetry could hardly survive, is figure of speech, or trope, in all its luxuriant variety. I believe linguistic is prepared to lay down the general rule that any trope represents an aberration from the conceptual ideal of discourse. It is surprising that in collegiate departments of English literature the tropes are not systematically studied as logical or a-logical devices. In this respect the moderns have lapsed from the critical scholarship of the ancients. I would like to write a critical note entitled, "From Aristotle to Longinus to Genung." The point would be that Aristotle made a very close analysis of a great group of tropes under the general head of metaphor, classifying its lawless procedures with at least a show of system; it might be said that he was examining the dodges, or the devices, by which reputable poets, who knew better, imported radicals or imaginal terms into an argument expecting conceptual or abstract terms. Longinus also was more than an ordinary analyst, and should be useful to us because his interest, in part

at least and perhaps chiefly, was in the tropes which are purely syntactical, and which obscure discourse by jumbling words together without showing their articulation; waiving conjunctions, and mixing up tenses, for example. The Greeks recognized both kinds of trope, and a regressive poetry needs both, though we hear today almost exclusively about the first kind, and find the second kind isolated from their poetic occasions and held up to detestation in freshman manuals under such heads as "Unco-ordinate Series" and "the *and* Fault." And, last, Genung, American author of a famous textbook of rhetoric, who names and defines most of the tropes with a very pretty scholarship, and appears innocent of any suspicion that the tropes of honored poets were acting with insubordination against the sequence and the unity of their discourses. But Genung flourished years ago, when official studies in English literature were new. The collocation of Aristotle, Longinus and Genung might prompt the query: What are the English studies doing? And when will intelligent linguistic come into them?

12. This will be my concluding Point. It concerns the over-all or generic motive of the poet, and in the light of his record of apostasy, aberration, sabotage and furtiveness I should not want to waive that question. I do not like to surrender to that ingenious motive-hunting which finds us doing everything for the sake of something else. We do many things because we must do them, and it only occurs to us later that we probably did them because we wanted to and must have had some "reason." Poetry is a discourse ordinarily in the indicative mode, therefore a mode of knowing, and probably one could say with touching piety that its motive is Truth. But who will tell us what that means? The truth, for the linguist at any rate, is what we know. Poetry is therefore a mode of knowing whose motive is to know. But some illumination is gained if we contrast the poetic language with the scientific lan-

guage. If my linguistic orientation is correct, poetic language arises historically because we are not happy over the improvements we make in our scientific language. We are not happy because these improvements require us to abandon progressively the imaginal or substantival elements. But the imaginal or substantival elements characterized a kind of language with which we were familiar by inheritance from our primitive ancestors—an actual and evidently a satisfying kind of language. The linguist will remark, perhaps by a slight departure from his professional duties though with all the more weight because of his disinterest, that there seems to be no testimony on the record to dispute the overwhelming agreement of the poets that these words refer to aspects of the world which are still there and visible in the world, though it may be that our modern linguistic training encourages us to pay little attention to them any more. As a man uses language so is he. But I do not mean to abuse scientific language in order to praise poetic language. There is as much impulsion upon us to develop our scientific language as there is to protect our poetry. These are two actual and valid languages, though the one is in protest against the other and their fraternal relations become more and more uncomfortable. I do not know anything further to say on this point unless I should import into a linguistic discourse for the sake of a final flourish a big word from formal philosophy. The word would be: *ontological*. The poet's motive is ontological just as is the motive of what we call the pure scientist; he is predicating about a character of the natural world, and it is not the character about which the scientist is predicating; though both might be said to be predicating about some character of The Way Things Are. But ontological would add little to the linguist's own nice sense of the poet's strategic situation except an impressive polysyllabic phonetic item. Suffice it to say that for linguistic the poet is in his duty.