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A Symbolist Manifesto

L. Eric Greinke
Grand Valley State University

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First Installment of a long Essay, to be serialized in future issues of this magazine. . . .

A SYMBOLIST MANIFESTO

Introduction

Works of art are not strictly defined. If poetry is ever going to catch up with painting, it will have to stop trying to 'make sense' & start taking as its source those parts of the mind that are not LIMITED by logic & reason.

This is going to require a special effort. For painters it is easier to be non-specific, since their words are 'meaningless' shapes & forms & colors. Poets have to deal with the fact that words represent 'meanings' already, yet, at the same time, this very difficulty gives the poet an additional tool that painters or musicians would have a hard time matching.

The poem, if it is to grow as an art-form, must be rescued from straight representation. If this is done, the result will be a poetry that is infinitely MORE MEANINGFUL than the old, specific-metaphorical type. If this is done, the result will be multi-leveled & SYMBOLIC poetry.

Advances have been made in the technique of 'leaping' from one perception to another. The THRUST of poetic development has been in the direction of the inner-mind. But still, the 'leaping' has not been all that it was cracked up to be, & the poetry of today's Imagists still lacks the real 'leaping' quality of a dream. This is because the Imagist poets have been too deliberate & exacting with their writing. They have made the distinct mistake of TRYING to be political, ignoring the fact that images, if they are left alone, carry their own special 'messages', & that these are all the more powerful (perhaps even political) for their ambiguity. If a poem is a good one, it has as many 'meanings' & effects as it has readers or hearers.

I am calling for a better kind of poetry: one that will make possible a whole new spectrum of psychological, political, religious, emotional & intellectual responses. The real value of poetry is neither totally external to itself, nor totally internal (autonomous) . A poem is a SYMBOL.

Part One - Fusing Emotion & Logic

A work of art always points to two things: to itself as a concrete reality, & to external meaning. If the external meaning is too specific & intentional, the work of art is impoverished by LIMITATION. Forced meaning flaws a poem.

Those who have tried to say that poetry can be examined through logical explication have made a big mistake. They have wrongly assumed that just because poetry uses language as its medium, it must (therefore) be understandable through semantics. They have failed to grasp the fact that language is NOT LIMITED to the pure representation of concrete phenomena, but that it is, on a much deeper level, ABSTRACT.

A poem exists in a reality of its own. From the first line of a poem a reader or hearer is in a state of elevated 'thinking'. While logic & reason are the methods of 'everyday thinking', they should not be assumed to be the only ways that the mind finds meaning. Logical thinking is, as a matter of fact, the most UNMEANINGFUL kind, because it is so restricted.

Dream research has proven that in order for a man to maintain his sanity, he must dream every night. If this nightly SYMBOLIC THINKING is interrupted or ceased altogether, a man will also lose his power to think logically.

Art is man's expression of his symbolic thinking, just as dreams are. Science & mathematics are his expression of lower, regulated thinking. To deny that he needs both would be foolish. Further, to deny the use of the symbolic portion of the brain in the creation of art is to deny the essential definition of what art is.

Where we go wrong thinking about poetry is that we forget that poetry is an art, an expression of symbolic thinking, & not a logically 'meaningful' thing. Poetry is only understandable on its own terms, just as science is understandable on its.

Reality is made up of BOTH of these aspects of man's brain: the logical & the emotional/symbolic. It is because we have denied the value of the emotional/symbolic brain for so long that we have developed so slowly in humanistic terms. We have developed our 'thinking' unevenly, with an UNDUE EMPHASIS on the logical part of our brains.

Poetry especially, more than any other art, can be a key to our symbolic thoughts. This is due to the dual nature of the WORD ITSELF. We are most familiar with words in a literal sense, & yet, words have an abstract nature as well. It is through words that the two can be fused.

I do NOT wish for symbolic thoughts to be transferred into logical thoughts. If this were possible, there would be no need for art at all. I DO wish that the symbolic world would be recognized by the logical world, & further, that by recognizing & balancing the two kinds of thinking, we could quite probably rid ourselves of our stupid social, political & religious attitudes, since these things must exist in both worlds themselves, as everything & everyone must.

The 'average' man expresses his non-logical, symbolic brain through his emotions. It is when he brings both his emotions & his reason into play that he most successfully copes with total reality. If he stifles either one or the other, he will fail for the very reason that reality's nature will not change, even though a man conceives of it wrong. Thus, the existence of an abstraction, such as 'God', is not changed because man fails to recognize that existence.

In poetry, the world can be discovered. To do this the poem must BE the world, containing BOTH its reason & its emotion. The poem in this way becomes a SYMBOL, & the symbol in turn can tell us about the world, & its reality.

The experiments of the Dadaists were extremely worthwhile, because they proved that words cannot be divorced from meaning, no matter how seemingly chaotic that meaning might appear. No Dadaist ever wrote a meaningless poem. Yet, many Dadaist poems seem somehow MORE MEANINGFUL because of their attempt to cast off stiff, logical modes of thought.

The problem with the Dadaists was disparity, as opposed to emotionally meaningful juxtapositioning. (More on this later.) Obviously, no two words connected together can really be disparate, but the Dadaists so perfectly expressed the symbolic brain that the effect was useless as poetry, for its failure to come halfway. In dreams there is a leaking-in from the logical brain. What poetry must do is recreate this compromise world. The effect will be as rejuvenating to society as a good sleep is to a tired man.

The Surrealists have made strides in this regard, but again, they have failed to bring the two worlds into a balanced compromise in most cases. Surrealism often seems to be done with the hope that by inserting a narrative line, the balance between symbol/image & logical thought will be accomplished. But narrative is not a true element. It is superimposed on a work AFTER the symbol already exists. When the symbols don't fit together emotionally, there is also the danger that the poem will not achieve a TONE that will give it symbolic meaning. I guess Surrealism is the new 'light verse'.

Irony plays an important role in Surrealism. It works on us when we read it, but often its effects do not ring true, for they are artificially produced by the poet, who is 'trying' too hard. Thus Surrealistic works often have no meaning in the larger reality.

This is where the emotions of the poet play their important role. The poet ORGANIZES the images he gets from his inner mind. He does this AFTER he 'thinks' of them, & writes them down the first time. The images he writes down are of things & events that SEEM important to him, that evoke strong response from him. He then marries his images to reason by controlling TONE. At this point (& possibly for all time) he does not know nor care to know the 'meaning' of the poem he has written.

Happily, we no longer have to argue whether or not a work of art can be divided into form & content. It is obvious that it cannot, for it is precisely the putting-together of the two elements that makes a work of art in the first place.

Where form is concerned, the most important element is TONE. By arranging symbols in a poem through the use of controlled tone, the poet creates a total world which expresses both emotion & concrete reality. Control of tone will be discussed later in this manifesto.

The aesthetic experience is a sudden recognition of truth. The reason it so often comes as such a powerful experience is that it FUSES our two ways of thinking & responding into yet a third thing: MYSTICAL LEARNING through symbols.

The truths taught through art cannot be taught in any other way. They are combinations of two ways of thinking, & thus, must remain combinations. That combination is the SYMBOL, & works of art are the only way the symbols can be recorded & transferred.

The truth of this statement is proven by art itself: what logical reason is there for the FACT that the Pieta is powerful? Or what purely emotional reason can there be? The sculpture successfully fuses emotion & reason into a unified SYMBOL, & this is exactly what all art attempts.

The reason that poetry has not advanced as quickly as the other arts is because of its supposed 'literal' nature, & yet, at the same time, it holds the greatest potential of any art BECAUSE it is a combination of two ways of thinking. If poets will recognize the true nature of language, they can avoid unbalance, & advance beyond the hopes of any other art-form.

The next installment of this manifesto will be more specific regarding Symbolism in poetry, & how to achieve it.

- L. Eric Greinke