

# Language

and

# Imagination

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*The poet hands over his wealth of visionary images, his luminous dreams to the artist in him. The artist is a critical craftsman who has to bring order and intelligibility into this over-abundance of poetic invention. He must render them communicable. He must eliminate and clarify. After he has done his work the poem is ready long before a line of it has ever reached ink and paper. He hands his product to the writer. Alas! Ask a painter whether he would find it natural to reproduce the vision which he sees by means of ink and grammar! But his vision is not essentially different from the visionary images of the painter. No, language is not a natural, but an unnatural, a quite horrible means to "tell" the poetic vision of a moving life.*

—Carl Spitteler

## LANGUAGE

AS THE SUN RISES, talk awakens. As soon as people have yawned themselves back to consciousness, their interminable chatter begins in innumerable languages, dialects, and jargons. Thundering avalanches of words pour from printing presses over the continents. And while housewives go silently about their work they listen to their talking-machines. In classrooms, lecture halls, and assemblies, on stages and in "talkies," public performers hope their audiences will like their expert speeches as much as they do themselves.

In this ever present verbal fluidity there are a few hard islands—works of great literature, they endure through the centuries. They *seem* to share the medium of language with all other kinds of talk; but what, then, is the secret of their perseverance? Why does Homer stay with us although no one speaks his language?

All other arts have a medium of their own. The noises of the world are not the musical tones woven into perfect musical compositions; the colors of things, seen in nature, are not the colors on the flat canvas through which the painter expresses him-

self and forces us to believe in a world of his own making. The sculptured stone ceases to be an inorganic block and seems to live although it is not alive; and the living body of the dancer is not the body of the dance integrating remembered gestures, expressive movements in space-time patterns. Only architecture is like literature, subject to a similar misunderstanding—there are many buildings but not much architecture, just as there are many books but not many poems; by "poem" I mean any literary work of art; and by "poet," likewise, I mean any artist who creates a work of art in the medium of words, regardless of whether it is in verse or prose.

Poetic language intends to create a symbol of life in its entirety. To achieve this ideal it makes full use of the ordinary informative and practical usages—but it does this by taking them out of their own temporal context, by de-realizing them while at the same time preserving them, heightening and intensifying them. Poetic language blends all other languages in a powerful potion, transfigured they yield *levels of meaning* in the complete poetic symbol—"symbol" means literally a "together-throw."

We distinguish the following six levels of linguistic meaning:

1. *The Physical Language:* A system of formed sounds appears to the eyes in script and to the ears in speech. It is the only aspect of poetry that is empirically real and can be recorded. Vocabulary and grammar are shared with all other non-poetic uses. No other art suffers under such a painful barrier. It confines the poet to a narrower or wider linguistic community in which alone his communication is understood. Physical language is *objective*; it is a shared appearance; the poet has to learn it and there is no end to this learning. But it is also *subjective*; each poet speaks it in his own individual way and he transmits his peculiar intonation and his preference for certain words to his writing. He makes the most of the musical potentials in lan-

guage, paying attention to sound-effects, melodic "ups" and "downs" or pitch-sequences; to intensity, rhythm and tempo. This attention, particularly when it is heightened in the musical structures of the verse, announces already poetic intentions and begins to differentiate poetic language from an inattentive use, where only what is said matters, not how beautifully, freshly, originally it is said. The tone in which I say something may be more important than the word used.

2. *The Symptom Language:* This is mainly a preverbal, non-verbal language of life itself. Life communicates itself through symptoms. Organisms respond to symptoms of danger or of lure. However, if I say that "he speaks like a teacher, a sailor, etc.," I value his manner of speaking as a symptom. Red dots of the skin are a symptom of measles and a baby carriage a symptom that the young woman pushing it is the mother. Poetry extends the symptom language to inanimate nature: The "same" snow may be inviting to sports or may be a "threat" to my bones; the "same" cloud may be a symptom of a devastating storm or of a beneficial rain. Poetry uses words to make you perceive such symptomatic situations. These situations are infinitely individualized, they are relative to the interests and roles of the individuals involved in them. There is no "sameness" ever, the language of life is surprising, unexpected, in one word *irrational*. Each symptom is new and different in an ever-changing individual experiencing. Poetry creates the impression of a unique and individual life acting and reacting within equally concrete and unique situations of immediate experience. This symptom language of life is stronger and more convincing than any mere verbal signification. "Deeds speak louder than words." If you see an actor on the stage say to a petitioner that his documents are nice, very nice indeed, and then see that they are thrown into the wastepaper basket, you believe the symptom, not the verbal assurance.

Through the medium of the first empirical-physical level of language a second level of images is conjured up. You are led to perceive the images of things, objects, persons, situations, landscapes, rooms, streets, public places, and so forth, which are symptomatic of the life that goes on in them; the landscapes and portraits of life are filled with symptomatic expressiveness. This second level in poetry is analogous to the "subject-matter," in painting. Pure music and abstract painting skips this level, while program music may vaguely contain it in its reference to "pastoral scenes" or "scenes from a market place," etc.

3. *Sign Language*: The sounds of language become signs, when they stand for and refer to any multiplicity of instances. A railroad sign points to the possibility of trains coming through at this point. Experience is widened and exhibits what is typical, what is repeated, what is the same and recurring "always and always and always." Poems may include vast theoretical awareness of scientific structures of the natural and the social world. Situations and actions may be significant for all of us at all times. *Fabula docet*. Without involving such general possibilities, literature may be entertaining and amusing, but not significant; the general significance of symptoms widens our horizon. Essential structures of life are no less important than individual events.

The second and third levels of language together comprise the language of object-experience in its immediate and mediated or rational aspects. The third level of general and typical significance appears through the second level of symptomatic situations, gestures, and events. And both of them appear or shine through the objective physical appearance of sounds.

4. *Expressive Language*: Basic expressive language appears as ejaculations, the "ahs" and "ohs" of life. I express how I feel the world is treating me. The object contents become the media of subjective attitudes, moods, emotions, feelings. Appearances are charged with the feeling-tones of agreeable/disagreeable, hostile/friendly, inviting/repulsive. But poetic expressiveness is not feeling but a make-belief of feeling. The poem may express sadness, but the poet personally may be very merry after having written it; or a humorous poem may be born out of personal gloom. It is a profound misunderstanding of poetic expressiveness to infer the personal-psychical privacy of the poet from it. What he feels personally or privately is at the very most an occasion, a spring-board, a raw material for the expressiveness of his poem. The hand that trembles with fever or rage can

not be the writing hand. Poetic passion is unimpassioned in its expression and performance. The actor choking with emotion is not able to convey the emotions in his lines. Expressive language is "emotion recollected in tranquility."

5. *Signal language*: Traffic lights are not only artificial, conventional *signs*, indicating general possibilities but they are at the same time *signals*, which tell you what to do or not to do. The signals express practical directives, they are imperatives. The most elementary practical signal language is contained in the imperative "do" and "don't." Practical life is at its thickest in war—and all military movements are directed by commands which are signalized.

The signal may be hidden as in clever propaganda. Its intention is to direct your will, to condition your practical attitudes, but intention may come disguised in the form of little stories which seem to be merely information. The signaling intent is veiled by factual object-language.

On this level we find the central moral problems of humanity, the struggle and battle for and against values, that which is held to be worthy of sacrifice and love. To portray the moved image of self-sacrifice, for example, is infallibly moving.

The practical signal-language of imperatives, again, is de-realized, taken out of its own context, peeled off, and presented in its purity, in its essence. The ever-problematic struggle for values, embedded in the social conflicts, becomes the non-problematic image in which friends and foes are treated with the same aesthetic love.

The poet may hate his villains morally, but as an artist he loves his character-portrait of his villain dearly. His characters signalize their will; their actions involve them necessarily in the consequences of their poetic destiny.

The self-expressive and the practical-moral signal language are the two subjective levels of language again blending and appearing through the symptom and sign language of the two objective levels. The four levels of meaning together accomplish a symbolic fusion of world and soul.

6. *Ceremonial Language*: A ring on a finger may be interpreted as a symptom that the wearer is married. In the religious marriage ceremony, however, it is meant to dedicate a holy union of two lives to God. The ceremony points beyond this life to an external and absolute Beyond, in which this fragmentary and questionable existence finds its ultimate ground and justification. Religious myths, legends, prayers, cults constitute a ceremonial body of expressions, repeated and traditionally adhered to. If the poet makes use of this religious side of life,

he takes into the poem an absolute dimension which becomes a part of the poetic symbol. He may be an irreligious writer making use of ceremonial forms, or he may be a religious writer without using traditional ceremonial forms. It is sufficient when his characters move, speak, and behave in such a way that the reader is aware that they are relying on an absolute ground of their faith beyond human practical power and scientific wisdom.

## IMAGINATION

Poetic language is a whole of many levels of linguistic meanings; they all shine through one another; one is both itself and at the same time the condition of the appearance of the others. The whole poetic symbol is built up by de-realizing all other linguistic meanings, by taking them out of their own real context, but preserving and heightening them in their new role as contributors to a new kind of reality, the aesthetic symbol. Symbol of what? Symbol of imagination! Without imagination, without the vision of levels and essential values of life as a whole—no poetic language and no poetic symbol! Poetic language is the outer appearance of life as imagined. Poetic language is imagination itself as appearing to others, imagination in the outward form of self-communication. The levels of linguistic meanings are inter-fused with the levels of poetic imagination in order to communicate to others the vision of life as a whole in all of its facets. There can be no poetic vision without poetic language, but there can be no true poetic language without imagination. "The third inspiration and frenzy from the Muses seizes a tender and sacred soul agitating and elating it to make appear a beautiful whole in festive hymns or other works of poetry; celebrating innumerable ("thousand") deeds of ancestors, it (this soul) cultivates posterity. But he who enters the precinct of this poetic temple without this 'mania' of the Muses, with the opinion he could become a poet through technique only, such a one is unauthentic and his learned art will be put to shame by the creation of the inspired." (Plato, *Phaidros* 255).

Poetry is the art of imagination. The words merely serve to evoke imagination in the hearer or reader. The direct, literal meanings of the words only serve to make appear the invisible reality of the soul. This letting see the soul through the cracks between the words and between the lines is the function of imagination, is imagination. Imagination lets a totality of life, the soul, appear.

How? One can approach the answer to this question by paying attention to various well-known psychical functions which are

approaches, pre-conditions, avenues to poetic imagination.

1. *The Dream.* Poets proverbially are dreamers. Dreams are spontaneously emerging images. They only seem to refer to external experiences, from which they take their "raw-material," their "face-values." At the same time, these images from external experience are de-realized, they are taken out of their normal, logical context, and are absorbed in the subjective context of the dreamer's situation in life. They are I-existent. They express how I find myself situated in life. They symbolize my moral status. They are, as Freud has taught us, expressions of wishes, urges and appetites which are not satisfied in waking life. But they are also censored by my logical and moral conscience, which distorts them and renders them ugly and monstrous. They are compromises between the turmoil of my vital-spiritual conflicts and my need for rest, for sleep. They may reveal in a flash of insight what it might take a long time to explain rationally. They may rise to poetic intensity and telling beauty—and may actually turn into a poem, if the dreamer can retain and retell their tale. If this takes place, the dream ceases to be floating and private, it becomes enduring and shareable. Poetic imagination as embodied in poetic language, is the dream made essential and universal, stripped of its mere psychical and private momentariness.

2. *Day-dream.* In the ordinary, unguided daydream the daydreamer projects himself into situations, he anticipates situations in which he plays a heroic role. He indulges in the sweet illusion of projecting himself as the center of his own scheming.

The transition from this to poetic imagination is to retain the ability to project and construct essential and vital situations, but stripped from ego-centricity.

The poet may tell his story in the "I" form, but the "I" of the story is a role, a character-mask which has his own will—the poet is not free to let the "I" of his story say anything that comes into his mind. He must be true to the character which tells the story. This is analogous to the transfer of spatial orientation from psychical to mathematical co-ordinates. The psychical center of our spatial orientation is placed between our eyes: from the root of the nose out we call something right or left, up or down, behind us or in front of us. Geometry replaces this private orientation, in which right becomes left as I turn around, with an abstract and arbitrarily chosen point, from which other points can be measured to be so many units out in fixed dimensions. The poet, similarly, projects an ob-

jective, communicated "I" in an objective, communicated situation with relationships that are seen as necessary and contributing to an understandable whole.

3. *Memory.* In the passage quoted from Plato, memory of an important past is the condition of a cultured future; and Aeschylus calls "Memory the mother of the Muses." Past experiences are not only gone but are also retained and stored for re-employment. Memory balances the anticipating projection of the daydream. Poetic projection at the same time feeds on memory. Vivid impressions are charged with symptomatic, emotional, theoretical, and moral significance. The time elapsed makes little difference. Freud has shown that very early experiences are still effective in late neuroses. The same holds for poetic imagination. Memories of forty years ago are still "standing by," and may all of a sudden contribute to a poem.

For everyday efficiency this openness of the poet to the treasures and threats of his subconscious soul may be very inconvenient. All of a sudden he is "off" and not "here and now." His vastly expanded presence of mind seems to others absent-mindedness. Carl Spitteler's novel *Imago* pictures the devastating effect of a remembered past, idealized and glorified in imagination, upon the factual and present actuality of practical existence.

4. *Suggestion.* When I was a boy I had a tame crow named Chäred. Chäred loved a little glass of cognac after Sunday dinners. He spread his wings about, staggered his feet inward, rolled his eyes so we could see the whites, crowed softly and voluptuously. In short, he was in a "rosy glow." But once we gave him dark tea in his cognac glass. He imagined it was cognac and produced all the effects as if he had actually drunk cognac and not merely tea. Such is the power of suggestion.

Poetry may be regarded as practicing this power of suggestion. We are forced to see things, events, characters, plots, and human destinies which never existed in practical actuality—but which seem more real and more concrete than the scattered and ever-changing experiences of life. The Muses, Homer says, grant us the vision of life as it really is; apart from them we know nothing—only rumors and opinions.

But poetic suggestion is not a practical delusion. It makes clear that its suggestion of reality is and moves in an ideal, de-realized realm of its own creation. It sets man free, it does not misguide him to a foolish confusion of practical actualities with its imagined life. Aesthetic distance allows us to identify ourselves with the suggested life which we know to be a spectacle for us.

5. *Occasion.* The external, unforeseen occasion is as important for the poem as an acorn is for the existence of a mighty oak tree. Goethe says that all his poems are "occasional." The occasion for his *Faust* written in sixty years, was the puppet play which the boy saw on the market fair in Frankfurt. The occasion for *Werther*, written in four weeks, was a newspaper item: "I heard the news of Jerusalem's suicide . . . and in this moment the plan for *Werther* was found, the whole shot together from all sides and became a solid whole, as water in a vessel on the point of freezing can be brought to crystallize in an instant through a minute shock." The occasion for the Gretchen tragedy in *Faust* was his love for a girl whom he felt he had to abandon—the guilt reaction had to be transformed into imaginative atonement.

Occasions are meetings, unexpected and uncontrollable; external circumstances act like catalysts in a chemical process. Hence the seemingly vague hunts of poets for such occasions; the often desperate waiting for a fruitful moment or "stuff." Poets read other poets not to find out what they have to say, but to find occasions for their own creativity. They seek adventures in strange social and geographical environments, where impressions are new and fresh and challenging, like Melville's "whaling" and Jack London's "bumming."

When an occasion presents itself it must be recognized as such, must be grasped, jumped upon. Hebbel was told the story of Herodes and Mariamne in the afternoon—and in the evening the main scenes of the tragedy were feverishly put to paper. Examples are endless. Aesthetically they tell us that imagination must meet the actual world in order to be and to become its own best and ideal self. However, the occasions need not be external, they may lie in the poet, his own "trauma" or "neurosis" may become the fruitful source of "seeing" the world and the ambiguities of life.

6. *The Creative Mood.* All forms and phases of imagination must work together and be actualized in the moment of creativity, of imaginative synthesis, which we call the creative mood.

There are many descriptions of this moment of the poetic mood. Hebbel told his servant who announced a visitor in such a moment: "Go tell him that I can have no other visitors when I am visited by the Lord."

I try a very general account: In the poetic mood the difference between I and other-than-I is obliterated in the feeling of sameness or oneness. The other than I, the image, is grasped and is transformed into an expression of myself—but this self is not an

individual or merely psychical I, but that I who can see in the other its inner and living character. Or: Imagination lives in an original unity, in an essential kinship with a beloved image of the world, which in turn expresses what the imagination is and does. It is the moment when the interplay of all faculties, as Kant calls it, becomes event. The impact of occasions, the freshness of intuition, the warmth of feeling, intellectual and moral values, play together to produce the totality of an ideal whole—which is the poem. The poet finds himself in his imagined world and the world in turn expresses and contains his self. "Objects" are freed from their conditions and are transfigured or "saved" in being imaginatively recreated. "The poet," says Goethe, "gratefully gives back to nature a truthful image of a second nature which is felt, thought, and filled with human significance."

7. *Levels.* The levels of linguistic meanings in the poem are complemented by the levels of imagination. The poetic symbol needs both the clarity and mastery of the linguistic medium as well as the reach and richness of imagination. Both scales start with the physical sound through which all other levels are made to appear.

The first level of imagination makes visible the image of natural and social scenes, milieus, moods, together with the image of persons, their movements, deeds, plots, long range actions and conversations. Beyond this level the entertaining literature does not rise.

The second level of imagination makes visible the inner character, the intelligible essences of events and persons. Corresponding to essential and inner character-motivations is the destiny, the understandable coherence of their interactions. We are not merely entertained, but get involved ourselves.

The third level of imagination gives us the feeling that we have here a world-mirror, in which nothing human is absent. These are the enduring world poems belonging to world literature and to all ages and races. They are the appearing wholeness and totality of life.

The totality of all levels is philosophical. The work of imagination gives metaphysical guidance and orientation. Ultimate world views are contrasted and embraced in that aesthetic love which is the counterpart to a mature dialectical unity of opposite world views. But the philosophical poets express it in terms of the preceding levels, in the language of life itself.

The nature of reality is made manifest in the poetic symbol of imagination.

## Faustian Journey . . .

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and his inabilities. Also, it would have been a cynical drama, because Mephistopheles would have won his wager with God; Mephistopheles would at least have reduced man to despair if not to the ignominy of accepting an artificial paradise. But Goethe knew, or at least believed, something truer about mankind and so the play has not quite ended yet.

For even after the failure of all these quests, there is a little of that old inner light remaining, and Faust feels within himself, even in spite of any wish to the contrary, the inner knowledge, the glorious dream of a state of paradise, and so he turns in his outer darkness to the men around him, asking them to continue the good works which, under different circumstances, might have led him to his fair moment. He asks that the good works continue, not in order that he may possess any beauty at all, but that he may have helped give beauty into the world as a legacy of his having been at all. If the fair moment cannot be for him, he at least still believes it can be for others.

Listening to the digging of what he thinks is the foundation for the dykes to ward off the sea, but which is actually the digging of his grave, Faust so broken and so deceived suddenly knows what the fair moment really is. It is not possessing beauty at all. It is not being superman at all. It is a giving, a creation, not for his sake but for the sake of others. Free of false quests at last, free of false techniques and bad means to an end, Faust at last alone, without Mephistopheles at all, completes the quest and cries out in that vigorous moment of charity, "I now enjoy the highest Moment—this!" And he falls dead upon the earth.

Mephistopheles can only scorn such an event—that is, Mephistopheles in the guise of the devil can only scorn. What was wrong with Faust anyway, heralding as he did the "latest, poorest, emptiest moment" as the fair and golden one? But Mephistopheles really knows, as Faust had learned, that it is not the poorest and emptiest moment; it is the only true moment and only rich moment he had ever had. Faust had learned what Goethe himself said another time, we should not expect happiness from this life; we should only do good; happiness, if we have it, is a by-product and not a goal. The fair moment is not in having beauty of person or beauty of idea or beauty of action—it is in the giving, not the having at all.

**T**HUS THE QUEST is ended and Mephistopheles does not win the divine wager. He didn't have a chance from the

beginning. He loses because Faust could not possibly accept as fair and golden any moment which resulted from a false quest and a false journey. And if we do accept, if Faust accepts, if Everyman accepts a moment that is at the end of the true quest and the true journey, then he has not substituted something less than paradise itself—he has only opened the door into eternal values.

Carried up through the landscape of heaven, Faust finds himself at last in the presence of the genuine model for that feminine form he envisioned so long ago. It is the Mater Gloriosa, the image of perfect and enduring beauty. Goethe has used, of course, in all his work the feminine form as the symbol of man's highest goals. Other symbols have been used in literature to express this abstract idea, but Goethe is in the tradition of what Robert Graves calls the White Goddess, the tradition of using woman as the great symbol of divine influence in the life of man. It is not so much, of course, the symbol of the female, as it is the symbol of the feminine, the gentle, the gracious that is being used. The Glorious Mother of the Universe includes within her identity, we may suppose, the personal beauty of Margaret, the universal beauty of Helena, and the great spiritual beauty of herself. Envisioning her, but not knowing her, Faust or Everyman comes at last to her, when he is able to make the good journey in the good way through life.

The dramatic epic *Faust*, begun as early as 1775 and not finished until 1831, is one of the intellectual and aesthetic masterpieces of world literature. It is, in essence, the story of paradise regained. It is a companion piece with Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Voltaire's *Candide*. These three works, put together, tell the great archetypal story of mankind, of you and me—the loss of heaven, our journey through the world, our eventual coming again into heaven—that abiding story of mankind, whether we think of it as a literal story, a metaphysical one, or a psychological one. Adam and Eve lost paradise and created and came into a harsh world; *Candide* journeys through the harsh world and adjusts to it the best he can; Faust goes beyond the adjustment and fulfills the dream, coming at last into a state of paradise that Adam and Eve had lost.

But what is paradise, what is heaven, what is it we would regain? The definitions and descriptions vary indeed. For Goethe heaven, wherever it may be, within us or without us, is not a having, but a being. It is not a static condition but a dynamic one. When Goethe was a young man he had written on the walls of his hunting lodge those famous words, "Über allen Gipfeln is Ruh," "Over all the hilltops is