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MacLeish's "Ars Poetica"

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ARCHIBALD MacLeish's "Ars Poetica" comes close to being the anthology piece of his poetry. It is also read aloud by the author in *An Album of Modern Poetry* (Gryphon Records, GR 902) as recorded for the Library of Congress. In 1946 Professor Donald A. Stauffer very excellently discussed this poem in *The Nature of Poetry* (Norton). Since it has become so familiar to students and since it does so remarkably image rather than define its author's conception of what a poem itself should be, a still closer examination into its specific symbolism and its tightly woven structure seems justifiable.

The poem is much more than an allusion-studded, cryptic collage or a painfully calculated, intellectual crossword puzzle. It is as cryptic as it needs must be, yet neither tortured nor willfully obscure. Its imagery is closely assimilated into the several related paradoxes of the poet's own conception of an organically unified poem. It is, in short, gratifyingly what it purports to be.

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has
grown—

A poem is necessarily an affair of words, yet it is "mute," "dumb," and "silent." Its imagery should be palpable to the physical senses, but its total effect of organic unity, of that imaginative synthesis which Coleridge believed should order and unify the rich variety of human experience, escapes mere verbal explication. The language of direct statement cannot capture or encompass the rich yet subtle suggestiveness implicit in poetic imagery in the sense that old medallions and sleeve-worn casement ledges conceal from casual familiarity their long contact with the continuous flow of human experience. Yet it is this "thick and slab" accumulation of use and wont from the passage of time with which the genuine poem is full and ripe as a globed fruit. "Globed fruit" incorporates the sense of the roundness of matured development, of the circle of perfection, and of the intimate asso-

ciation of poetry with the vitality and organic significance of life. Like ripe fruit, the poem is the epitome, the ultimate physical, or verbal, form the poet's intense inward experience finally assumes.

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

THIS fourth and culminating simile, emphasizing silence to the point of wordlessness, associates the inspiration of the poet with that of the ancient augur, who was concerned with discovery of the divine truth of Jupiter in the phenomena of nature. The truth of poetry inheres within its deeply suggestive imagery, which otherwise appears inscrutable in terms of the specific and literal signification of language. The image of the flight of birds further suggests the soaring imaginative inspiration of the poet.

Now we come to what seems to be the crux paradox of the poem:

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter
leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

A poem is not only mute but also motionless in that it transcends time. Here is suggested the dominant image of the poem as Microcosm, incorporating, as does the Macrocosm itself, the fundamental duality of truth implicit in nature—the absolute and the relative, the eternal and the temporal, unity and diversity. This synthesis of polarities, of the two-fold nature of truth, of motion and the motionless, also finds expression in a poem. The Taoist sage Lao-Tzu, in the

Tao Te Ching, incorporated both the indeterminate aesthetic continuum and its determinate differentiations as essential and inseparable aspects of reality. Similarly, Henry Vaughan, in "The World," had a vision of this dual, complementary nature of reality:

I saw Eternity the other night,
Like a great ring of pure and endless
light,
All calm, as it was bright;
And round beneath it, Time, in hours,
days, years,
Driven by the spheres
Like a vast shadow moved, . . .

AS in the excerpt from Vaughan's poem the endless motion of the moon in time and space operates within the motionlessness of the absolute. The moon would seem to be a more appropriate image than the sun, representing a greater variety of change and a more intimate association with the mystery of life and nature. With her apparent rising and setting, her monthly cycles, and her waxing and waning, she was for the ancients a goddess of poetry and mythology; and, despite recent space exploration, she has remained for us a mysterious light in the vast profundity of night. She ceaselessly passes through the world of nature and the life of man, which, in a sense, is a growing composite of a succession of memories. Indeed, the Muses themselves were daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the personification of memory.

A poem should be equal to:
Not true

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above
the sea—

Unlike an abstract statement of the

Ars Poetica

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

*

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,

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A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean
But be.

Archibald MacLeish

truth, historical or philosophical, a poem is its own equivalent for the contraries of human experience, which is the basic stuff of poetry. In simple concrete images the poet may embody the antithetic universal human feelings of grief and joy. An empty doorway may epitomize the entire history of human grief;

a maple leaf in autumn, the inevitable death of all organic life, vegetable as well as human. The antithesis of grief, or death, is naturally love, joy, vitality, and creativity, which, I suggest, may be imaged in "leaves of grass" as well as in the dominant celestial luminaries of the heavens—the sun and the moon,

Note: This poem appears in *From Poems: 1924 to 1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1933). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

respectively, representing the masculine and feminine principles of nature—in their unending dance over the elemental sea.

MacLeish concludes his succession of images and similes with a simple abstract statement that "A poem should not mean/ But be." Aptly, he has conveyed this idea in the very texture of the poem itself by the indirect poetic language of suggestion. The poem is a vital experience, not a merely descriptive report of an experience. And this poem about the meaning of poetry does not simply tell

us what it is; it succeeds in actually becoming what it purports to demonstrate. Importantly, the poem is not an isolated experience in itself; on the contrary, it images life in its ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies. The language of poetry, with its rich suggestibility of concrete imagery, endows human experience with its peculiar impact of immediacy. In short, the Macrocosm of life is mirrored in the Microcosm of the genuine poem. MacLeish's we feel, is such an accomplishment, a rarity among poems on the art of poetry.

Potter

How I have loved my language, as I love
 expansions and diminishings that I
 feel minutely, hear and know. My 'sky'
 has altered forty different ways; 'above'
 rings mighty changes with but thinking of
 —in space, thought, politics, and why
 no more in spirit than in human cry?
 To-ward Futurity a constant shove.
 Yet: ancient meanings, never left behind,
 will tag along, swirled as a comet's tail,
 'prevent' retaining connotations kind
 and favoring, while offering to fail.
 And 'love' lives language as I hear it, blind
 shaper of shards upon a language wheel.

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