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The Broken Places by Joseph Dionne

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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, and writes them down the first time. The images he writes down are of things and events that seem important to him, that evoke strong response from him. He then organizes 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 and 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 and 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 and 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, and thus must remain combinations. That combination is the symbol, and works of art are the only way the symbols can be recorded and 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 and reason into a unified symbol, and 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, and 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, and advance beyond the hopes of any other art-form.

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

- L. Eric Greinke

BOOK REVIEW


Joe's novel is a Cassius novel. It has a lean and hungry look. Compact, direct and fast paced, with bitter humor and language wound tight with a torque wrench and bolted with explosive hardware. It has the poet's way with words, compaction and compression. Nothing is wasted.

Pvt. Justin St. Clair, U.S. Army, peacetime France, has been given an almost sacred charge by his grandfather:

When the rest of the family died, Emil and I, we carved their headstones. Too poor to buy any of that fancy polished granite. It took us months, then there were a lot of them and Emil was only a youngster. An angel holding a shepherd's staff and at the crook of the staff, I carved ST. CLAIR. You can tell a lot, you see, by the headstone. You leave a little of yourself in giving a gravestone. Not those shitty big things. These Americans like to have a cathedral over them. But you boys know what kind of a stone I want and I wouldn't wait for your mother to get it. So I guess it's up to you. It's a responsibility. You always owe something to somebody in this world. Even to the dead. You'll put me down in Indiana, that's too bad. I wish it were different...

Justin will leave more than a little of himself in the giving of a gravestone. He is restricted to post for two weeks. He is fined fifty dollars per month for three months for breaking that restriction on Christmas Eve, the night he is given the virginity of Chantelle de Hillereau, the French girl he loves. He and Serge, a French friend, resort to crime, robbing a number of French Businesses. The last theft is perhaps the funniest scene in recent fiction, the robbery of a whorehouse:

"Pssst, hey gangster, you want to take me with you? Where are you going gangster? South America?"

A shadow of doubt crosses Serge's face. The blonde is writhing on her stool, her hands wandering back and forth over her blouse, pressing her breasts flat, then letting them bulge out between her hands.

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"Quiet." Serge's voice seems to crack. The blond is smiling broadly now and has undone the buttons of her blouse. Black bra, lace on the top and two white hills holding onto the edge.

"Come on Chicago, stick that pistol between here."

Hands around in back, the bra falls and her tits bounce down nearly to her navel. The blonde presses them together to form a crack between; flesh leaks out around her fingers. Behind the bar, the serious woman has filled the sack and is holding it as if she were making up her mind. The other girls on the stools have lost their initial shock now.

"Hey gangster, want to see what your mama's got?"

My tiny brunette has jumped down from her stool and is holding her skirt over her hips. Those are the smallest red panties I have ever seen and good God, they're wide open at the crotch. . . (page 137-138)

Serge, completely confused, is shot by the madame and Justin runs out. He and Chantelle go to Cherbourg, buy the gravestone and bribe the cemetery guard. Justin returns alone at night, tears up the military headstone, replaces it with the angel and finds that the bribe didn't stick. He is caught. Chantelle has wakened in the meanwhile and caught a train for home alone. Justin follows to find her father has died and she won't see him. He turns himself in at the army post but is tried and sentenced to five years by the French court for the robbery. On his release - - after three years because he is a model prisoner - - Justin locates Chantelle in Paris, finds she has a child, is beaten by her husband and returns to the United States.

He has truly left much of himself in giving of a gravestone. And that in itself is enough, but there is more. The Broken Places is constructed on two time-lines, the first related above. The second, which opens the book and appears several times, is a near past, after Justin's return from France. He is still giving - - to a Janet Picaro. They are to be married. She and her movie magazines are living with him. At the last moment, three days before the wedding, Justin can give no more, takes all the money they have saved and has his brother drive him to Canada.

Critics will have quite a time with this book, sorting the time-lines and the flashbacks, giving mythical significance to Justin, arguing whether or not it is picaresque, so I close with a note for them: Joe knows the myth of Sisyphus and his favorite novelists are Hemingway and Donleavy.

- Winton Riffe
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