

Actional iconicity

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From a letter to Masako Hiraga (9.9.92):

Yesterday I had this idea which is doubtless totally irresponsible about our conference. Like why is Blake's "The Tyger" iconic? I don't think it is, in the standard sense, at least not in any sense of "iconic" that I am familiar with.

So how can I talk about Tyger in our conference, whose theme is poetry and phonosymbolism? The other papers are about iconicity, to judge from their titles, and even if we focus on the word *symbol*, hiding in *phonosymbolism*, the usual take on this word that I have encountered has to do with the communicative function of language. There is, however, a very strongly-worded opposing position in *The Dictionary of Symbols*.

But I would like to suggest that the feature of poetic language which is the most important, maybe – namely its ability to ENACT, rather than to be about something, is a kind of iconicity that we should recognize and maybe extend the term "iconicity" to include. The Tyger is not an essay about the dark force in the universe and/or the necessity of going deeply into that blackness to bring back a Tyger of a poem and/or the fearfulness of the inescapability of the logic of opposites and/or etc.

Tyger *I*S* our seeing/hearing that truth. Tyger

*MO*V*E*S*

(to use another nice metaphor for the first time here)

us

I think that in the structure of Tyger there is plenty of evidence that this process of discovery is enacted. The drama of Tyger is that we know before line 20 what line 20 has to be, yet we are still surprised, trembling, in awe, humbled by the presence of The Numinous –

when line 20 happens to us – because Blake is such a master dramaturge, and never does what we say in English is a bad way to tell jokes – he never telegraphs the punch line.

We have always known the answer to

Did he who made the Lamb make thee

(By the way, something incredible, which a colleague here, Rajeev Patke, showed me: in the engraving of the poem, THERE IS NO QUESTION MARK AFTER THAT LINE – the only such non-question "question" in the poem)

and Blake's genius lets us "rediscover" it. Not all at once – slowly, premonitively (to invent a verb).

Imagine how awful a poem it would have been if Blake had put that line between each of the verses.

Well – what do you think? Is that a kind of iconicity too? The structuring of a poem in such a way that it Does what it Says?

From a letter to Pete Becker:

That was the first wording of the following question – since the crucial question for a poem is not what it's about, but HOW it goes about being about it, I was thinking that we should have a different kind of notion of iconicity than the standard one, which after all is kind of linked to the communicative function of language, no? I mean, what I have understood is that iconic language COMMUNICATES in a different way, using some kind of similarity. But not that MOVES us in a different way. Maybe they are the same thing.

But see, I am thinking along these lines: what happens when a poem is made, I think, is that the poet goes into a trance, sorta, goes to a place where there is no space and time, no separation between subject and object, etc., becomes one with the universe, etc., – all the standard good stuff. “There,” she or he sees/feels something which is poemable, and “comes ‘back’” and writes some words

WHICH ARE "ICONIC" IN THIS NEW SENSE THAT I AM LOOKING FOR A WAY TO TALK ABOUT.

That is, these words, by their very structure TRANSPORT US to "the same" place, or to a "Place" which is pretty close to where the poem was born. Some of the structures which I have seen again and again in poems are sort of hallmarks of that cosmic place, which is also THE place which we visit in meditation, or with the help of friendly plants, etc.

Like what hallmarks? Fusion of subject and object, lack of sequentiality (which for instance, poems "say" by having sequences of sounds or other items in the order AB tao or coevoked sequences in the order BA. This "says" (but MORE-THAN-ICONICALLY, in this new sense that I'm groping towards),

you are there

Dear Reader: "Here" we are in Cosmicland, no space, no time, no separation, no "you" and "me," just us being God together.

I find myself always getting irritated when I say or hear "this poem is about ..." That seems such a trivial take on a poem. Sure, Prufrock is "about" feeling your age, about a man growing old. But its permanence is because it **takes** you there. You grow old with not only Eliot, with anyone whose life has been measured out with coffee spoons.

For me. a poem is like a ticket to a funhouse, to a rollercoaster ride, to a funeral, like a sacred mushroom. Tyger is not "about" the coevocation of opposites, it's not an essay [though of course, it comes out of a philosophy, has necessary philosophical underpinnings], and we know better about how to talk about aboutnesses than about doesnesses. So a lot of criticism is about aboutness.

And I have always thought of iconicity until recently in terms too of aboutness. But now that seems to be too low a take on the kind of iconicity which a poem IS [NB: not merely "has"]. I think that we have not seriously enough realized the demolitive effects which one can derive from really letting the last couplet of MacLeish's "Ars poetica" sink into our being:

A poem should not mean
but be

If "mean" is for me linked to aboutness – "be" is linked to this other thing which I am groping for, and which is metaelusive (and must remain so, of course)

I wonder what would happen to us if we steadfastly refused to use sentences like "the poem has ..." and replace them with "the poem is ..."

Like: "Tyger is six four-line verses."

Then, when the overwhelming evidence starts to come in that there is a structural "countermelody" going on in Tyger, which segments it also into four six-line sections, we also say, equally loudly:

Tyger is four six-line verses.

And, most importantly, since, in all of this loose talk, the following "isnesses" are also relevant:

The reader is the poem

The reader and the poet are one

you have a derived lemma:

You, reader, are simultaneously six verses of four lines and four verses of six lines.

"Where" that takes you, Dear Reader, is to a "place" where there is no hierarchy – "where" it is neither sayable that sixness is superior to fourness, nor that fourness is superior to sixness. You are "where" such notions as "superiority" have fallen away.

I don't know to what extent any of this is making sense to you, but it is beginning to become visible to me, anyway, what it is that I have to try to find a more intelligible way of formulating.

I want to leave the view that poems are meaners to go to a metaview which says that yes they are meaners AND ALSO enactors.

So Prufrock enacts your mortality.

Tyger enacts your darkness. (and Godfulness, and [many other things simultaneously])

If this is making any kind of sense, (and with luck, simultaneously enacting it), is there anyone else who has made/enacted it in a sort of parallel way? Is this what hermeneutics enacts?