

More Than Glass

If you focus beyond, your eyes will see
the two-dimensional begin to prove
- as it hovers above the text, empty
of roses buried in snow - it moves.

Around this nothing, your thoughts perform
their decadent dance for a dream
more real than the page they rest upon
(where patterns cannot be but only mean).

Spit out the pips and you shall unpeel;
pass through the glass and you will see God.
If this is life, what must an angel feel
or colours see in the lands where Christ has trod?

Of thin red wine in the sunlight, sip
and pray his blood stains more than just the lip.

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Critical commentary on this poem:

To say that the best poetry eludes paraphrase is to say that it eludes criticism. When assessing the formal workings of a poem one refers to its subject matter (the same technique creating different effects in different contexts) and this necessitates some form of paraphrase. Even when demonstrating the symbiosis between a poem's form and content, criticism mimics the process of unification (albeit in a different language) which the poetry has already affected.

Therefore I tried, through emulating, to capture the spirit of Louis MacNeice's poem, 'Snow', instead of offering a critique. Through my poem, I try to imitate the way he uses abstract terms to highlight - by contrast - the physicality of the room in that vibrant snow-light.

However I did not succeed at the start of my poem as I allowed some literary criticism to creep in. It opens with a prosaic reference to the way you need to physically focus beyond the textual patterns on a stereogram before the 3D image comes to life and hovers before your eyes like a real object. The later references to the spiritual aspect of this in terms of Christianity are also rather 'on the nose' (God's spirit causing creation; a spirit led life leading to physical resurrection etc).

The critical prose attempt at 'bringing together all that is splintered, scattered, and spreading away from the centre'¹ will usually – as it has in this case - fallen short of the poem's (that is, MacNeice's poem, 'now'). This is because poetry, as an art, is a more concentrated medium, purposely fashioned for synchronisation; whereas criticism is limited to the intellectual plane which, in itself, tends to be baffled by synthesis ('the intellect can only deal with the extensive multiplicity').² Thus great poetry is, ironically, revealed not by virtue of literary criticism's merits but by its inadequacies. When criticism fails to paraphrase a poem, it puts that poem's achievement into perspective; showing the way that, in leaving nothing for the critic to add, it has used language to its utmost expressive force.

In this instance, MacNeice's superiority as a poet has been proved by the critical and prosaic nature of my attempt to emulate. The way I inevitably fell into the paraphrase trap.

¹ Leo Tolstoy, 'Letter to a Youth' (describing the creative process of 'great teachers')

<https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Letter_to_a_Kind_Youth> (Accessed 9th February 2024)

² T.E. Hulme, 'Romanticism and Classicism' in David Lodge, *Twentieth Century Criticism: A Reader* (London, 1998), p.