Reality *vs.* Poetry
From the Viewpoint of Wheelwright

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I

In the course of studying literature one of my chief objective and subject of constant challenge has been something of a truism. What is literature, and what is the essential qualities that make literature what it should be. Let us start with the simple proposition that literature is based on language whatever the vewpoint. This is a vast subject and I have to narrow the scope of discussion this time to poetry. Since poetry itself is not the topic of this paper, suffice it to say that definitions of poetry vary depending on the variety of rhythm used, the diversity subjects handled; they are further complicated by an endless series of experimentation and, of course, by the number of languages and cultures involved. In this paper I will look at poetry at its ideal form such as best represents reality. A large number of eminent philosophers and scholars, drawing their inspirations from Oriental thought, have developed a new approach to poetry. Philip Wheelwright, for one, borrowing ideas from Buddhism and philosophical Taoism, argues:

> ...with the opening up, toward the end of the nineteenth century, of Oriental ways of thinking and expressing, the limitations of the Western linguistic perspective began to be more evident.[1]

His scholarship in literature is well supported by modern European semantics, and his exploration into the universal resources of poetic language deserves special attention. His philosophy of literature proceeds from the proposition that tension exists between two opposing forces:

> There exist conflicting forces in nature, which interact according to physical laws.

Thus, for language to be poetic it has to be living and tensive. He goes on:

> In full human awareness there is likely to be a tension between these opposing and complementary tendencies.

According to him, language that strives toward adequacy is characteristically tensive to some degree and in some manner. Before taking up tensive language, I will briefly note his classification of languages: steno-language and living language, or closed (logical) language and open language. Language becomes closed and static from habit when the imagination fails, so that the same words are repeated with examination or critical integrity. (p. 37) Logical language (closed by stipulation) on the other hand, is manifestly of great importance in situations and types of questions to which it properly applies: its powers of reference are limited. Intelligibility is manifold. It can be simplified so as to be widely understood, or it can be confined, with scientific responsibility, to the kind of thing which can be demonstrated by experiments and observations to be shared publicly. In either case, however, *something* is left out. A definite whole is never the whole. Mans yearning for truth cannot be entirely satisfied either by public agreement or by secure precision. (p. 39) Wheelwright emphasizes that

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Press, 1962), p. 23. Page numbers are shown subsequently at the end of passages quoted.

truth is not necessarily exactly logical, quoting Laotze: "The reality (Tao) that can be conceptualized is not the essential reality." Thus Wheelwright concludes that language must be open:

> Language that is open may be loose and flabby, or it may be taut and alive.

Phenomena of the world are essentially vague, shifting, problematic and often paradoxical. To do justice to these characteristics, language itself has to adapt to them somehow, that is, to remain open. (p. 43) For a further clarification of the characteristics of language he says:

> It is not enough for language to be open, for open language may be loose, ambiguous and ineffectual.

And further:

> Even in the simplest forms of poetic language some semantic tension can be discerned and felt, for without at least a flicker of tensive life the language would be semantically dead and therefore non-poetic, regardless of what the reputation of a work might be or what versifying ingenuity it might display. (p. 48)

This argument is quite in keeping with his view of "a ceaseless but varying struggle between opposite forces in all organic life." He sees the organic strife in man as showing itself in tensions, largely unconscious or at most only partly conscious. These tensions appear, according to him, between self and other persons, between self and physical environment, between love and antagonism, between impulse and decisions of rational thought, between life-urge and fascinations of death. In trying to give expression to his complex nature and his sense of the complexity around him, man creates representational and expressive forms which provide some hint of turbulence within him and oustide. (p. 46) He calls this effort "the expression of radicality,"

which corresponds to what Alan Watts calls the "suchness of things."
(p. 52) It represents but one aspect of experience; it is not abstract
but "mimetic." Wheelwright continues:

> The tensive character of living language may be something more than the
> poet's choosing and individual perspective from which, at the moment, to
> look and to speak. There is always some tension, however delicate, between
> the bright center of particularity that is singled out for attention and dim
> tail-of-the-eye impression of qualities and meanings and perspectives that was
> left out. (p. 54)

> Another kind of tension...arises from the overtones of universality that
> may be implied in an utterance. Such tension is typically found in the
> relationship, perhaps uncertain and wavering, between the situation as
> described or the succession of images· as presented, and the strong glimpses
> of truth that they suggest without actually stating. (p. 55)

Wheelwright has adopted I.A. Richards' expression "vehicle and
tenor," (standing, respectively, for the imagery or concrete situation
described, and for the ulterior significance this suggests to the res-
ponsive imagination.) The theory of tension can be applied to the
relationship between "vehicle and tenor." Poetic language achieves its
maximum effect when tension between vehicle and tenor becomes more
appropriate. In other words, when vehicle is too close to tenor, tension
may be relaxed, and if the two are too far apart, then no tension can
appear. In Wheelwright's wording, "The essence of metaphor consists
in a semantic tension which subsists among the heterogeneous elements
brought together in some striking image or expression."[2] This brings
him close to T.S. Eliot, who recommends far-fetched metaphor, and
in fact, Wheelwright quotes him:

> Garlic and sapphires in the mud

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2) Philip Wheelwright, 「*The Burning Fountain*」(Bloomington: Indiana Unive-
rsity Press, new and revised edition, 1968), p. 102.

Clot the bedded axle-tree.

Much has been made of the word garlic. Some say that the image here is the white garlic flower, or the pungent smell and taste of garlic used as an ingredient of food. John M. Brinnan's reading seems more convincing. In his interpretation of this poem, garlic stands for "sensory" and sapphires for "beautiful," and things of this world, sensory and beautiful alike, clot man's vision of God at the center (symbolized here by axle-tree). The beautiful here may be taken to be the tenor with sapphires as its vehicle. Likewise, the axle-tree represents the vehicle and the image of God its tenor. Tenor, of course, reaches out beyond these items mentioned; it is manifold in range. Yet tenor and vehicle remain in relation, accompanied by the inevitable tension.

II

"Metaphor is a heart of poetry." Thus said Lerner in his *English Literature.* Metaphor reveals something of the nature of tensive language. Metaphor is a kind of transmutative process or semantic motion. Implicit in the word metaphor is the idea of motion (*phora*). What is meant by semantic motion is the double imaginative act of outreaching and combining, which marks the metaphoric process.

> What really matters in a metaphor is the psychic depth at which things of the world, whether actual or fancied, are transmuted by the cool heat of the imagination. (p. 71)

Wheelwright divides metaphor into two distinct elements—*epiphor* and *diaphor*; the former standing for the outreach and extension of meaning through comparison, the latter for the creation of new meanings by

juxtaposition and synthesis. (*Epiphor* taken from Aristotle means the "transference of a name to some other object.)

> Her terrace was the sand
> And the palms and the twilight.
>
> She made of the motions of her wrist
> The grandiose gestures
> Of her thought.
>
> The rumpling of the plumes
> Of this creature of the evening
> Came to be sleights of sails
> Over the sea.

<div align="right">Wallace Stevens, Infanta Marina</div>

While it is true that an *epiphor* involves comparison as its central activity, and thus presupposes some kind of similarity between vehicle and tenor, it does not follow that the similarity need be obvious nor the comparison explicit. An already obvious resemblance would not provide any energy-tension; a steno-statement of comparison is not an epiphor. (p. 74)

It is only natural that imagists should incline toward epiphory since they prefer clear-cut imagery.

The word *diaphor* is Wheelwright's coinage: movement (phora) through (dia) certain particulars of experience, actual or imagined. Now I turn to a famous poem by Li Po of T'ang China and see how this idea might apply. The poem goes as follows:

> I wake, and moonbeams play around my head.
> Glittering like hoar-frost to my wandering eyes:
> Up towards the glorious I raise my head,
> Then lay me down—and thoughts of home arise.

<div align="right">Li Po, Night Thoughts</div>

In the first line there suddenly unfolds a magnificent image that commands the scene. The "hoar-frost" in the second line may be taken

as an epiphoric metaphor of a dazzling sheet of moonlight spread over ground reminiscent of white frost; the reader is immedately remainded of the coldness of a winter moon. And the moon brings back memories of many a moonlit night spent back home.

Less frequently does one come across examples of *diaphor* simply because it occurs only in combination. It would be pertinent to recall the word *esemplastic*, attribiuted to Coleridge, designating the same kind of poetic activity—bringing diverse particulars into a new perspective. In "The Waste Land" Eliot produces effects for the most part by a synthesis, often abrupt, of diverse images and situations, and to that extent it is diaphoric.

> The essential possibility of diaphor lies in the broad ontological fact that new qualities and new meanings can emerge, simply come into being, out of some hitherto ungrouped combination of elements. (p. 85)

The most effective cases of metaphor are usually to be found in combinations of the epiphoric and the diaphoric.

> Along a path among the crimson flower beds,
> Where flowers of oblivion conspire death,
>
> My love runs away, calls me
> Along the path that coils like a drunk snake.
>
> The scented blood dripping from my nose
> Into my palm, I follow her
>
> In the boiling noon, still as night
> Burning, burning, two of us.
>
> Sŏ Chŏng-ju, High Noon[3]

The first stanza provides us with a fine example of epiphor and diaphor in combination. In ending his chapter on metaphor Wheel-

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3) Peter H. Lee, compiled and translated, 「*Anthology of Korean Poetry*」 (New York: The John Day Co. 1964), pp. 172-3.

wright sums up by saying that the role of epiphor is to hint sig-
nificance, while that of diaphor is to create presence. (p. 91)

III

> A symbol, in general, is a relatively stable and repeatable element of
> perceptual experience, standing for some larger meaning or set of meanings
> which cannot be given, or not fully given, in perceptual experience itself.
> (p. 92)

Symbols are of two kinds. A steno-symbol indispensable to science; a
tensive symbol which "cannot be entirely stipulative, inasmuch as its
essential tension draws life from a multiplicity of associations." A poet
works with his symbols, according to Wheelwright, "by recontextua-
lizing to give them life." In picking a presiding image with its
symbolism, the poet has the choice between a traditional symbol to
be renovated and a new symbol untried before. Wheelwright's pres-
cription is merely suggestive as he continues his discourse, repeatedly
alluding to classical writers such as Dante, Stevens and Shakespeare.
The choice then is a matter of the poet's preference and the needs of
the situation. To hear Wheelwright more on symbols, there are five
of them with varying degrees of expressiveness or breadth of appeal—
the presiding image in a poem, the personal, those of ancestral vitality,
those with cultural range and archetypal symbols. A symbol, unlike
metaphor, has the advantage of recurring, leaving the reader with a
lasting impression which persists well beyond his perusal.

Symbolism having been disposed of, we still miss another vital
quality—mystic element, a sine qua non of any masterpiece. Opening
his chapter on "Notes on the Study of Myth," Richard Chase says
that he does hold to the common belief that a work of creative lite-
rature must be brought closer to being a myth. He does not say that

myth is an "indispensable substructure" of a poem; rather, he views poetry as lying under myth. Hence, myth is less inclusive than poetry. He continues:

> Poetry becomes myth when it performs a certain function, an idea which Vico entertained and one which...is abundantly affirmed by modern anthropology.[4]

Myth is generally believed to be related to ritual in which the audience participates. Malinowski's definition of myth is apt: "a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality" which serves to satisfy the need of primitive man for "a vibrant sense of present reality." (p. 71) In such a view of nature, one comes to know nature only through the instrumentality of ritual. This is what Cassirer dwelled on when he said that "to know nature truly in a mythopoetic way one must engage in the gestures and ritual acts..."[5] Myth is a "real story" because it is based on "real experience." And this is more than any factual fiction or fabricated artifact can claim. "The mythic imagination," argues Philip Rahv, "is a believing imagination," which "envisages its objects as actually existing."[6] Myth has a power out of all proportion to its visible components, a power that can be fully appreciated only by intuition and shared beliefs.

In modern times, myth no longer exists in the guise in which it was invested in the primitive period. It is thus made less immediately apparent by the overgrowth of narrow specializations and the militant ascendancy of the rational and functional in today's life-style.

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4) Richards Chase, "Notes on the Study of Myth," John B. Vichery, ed. 「Myth and Literature」 (New York: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 67.

5) 「Burning Fountain」 (op. cit.), p. 154.

6) Philip Rahv, "The Myth and the Powerhouse," op. cit. 「Myth and Literature」. p. 112.

IV

Our last topic is how one can reach reality. Wheelwright points to three avenues toward reality—presence, coalescence, and perspective. It is in some meaningful relationship with another human being, he suggests, that one achieves a heightened sense of presence. According to him, only by meeting the other person "with an open, listening, responsive attitude" does one experience a "presence," when the relationship becomes one of I-thou. (pp. 155-6) Borrowing from Buddhist thought, he stresses the unknowability of reality through mere verbalization. More specifically, he argues from a dialogue between a Japanese Zen master and his disciple:

> When two persons meet and their meeting is one of mutual presentness, the essentiality of their meeting has nothing to do with names and addresses... The real awareness in a personal meeting is something quite other than informational detail. No multiplication of such details, however full and meticulous, can be a substitute for real meeting. The sense of presence that occurs to one who catches a sudden glimpse of, say, a certain contour of hills or a red wheelbarrow in the rain, defies explanation, for when explanations are begun or sought the sheer presentness diminishes or disappears. (pp. 158-9)

O moon
Go to the West, and
Pray to Amitabha
And tell

That there is one who
Adores the judicial throne, and
Longs for the Pure Land.
Praying before Him with folded hands.
Can the forty-eight vows be met
If this flesh remains unannihilated?

Kwang-dok (661-681) Prayer to Amitabha[7]

7) Peter H. Lee, tr. op. cit., p. 35.

In its stark simplicity of this verse one can, if he listens intently enough, perceive a presence.

Coalescence of subject and object, in keeping with Taoist ontology, is what wheelwright invokes in his attack on Cartesian dichotomy:

> Reality as distinguished from the intellectual artifacts that often usurp the name, is neither object nor subject, neither matter nor can it be limited to any other philosophical category; it is that to which every such category tries to refer and which every philosophical statement tries to describe, always from an intellectual point of view and always with ultimate inadequacy. (p. 167)

This philsophical view has long since been popularized in the arts of China, Korea and Japan. To return to wheelwright:

> For what is I that seeks thus to coalesce with its world? Without attempting to define the I in a philosophically adequate manner...we may at least observe that the poetically significant I...the I as it enters into the making and into the appropriate reception of a poem—consists largely of images, visual, auditory, motor, structural. Such images are always particular in their existence, but in their intent they are more than particular. for they point and hint and inquire indefinitely beyond. Thus the first kind of coalescence, between self and not-self, involves a second kind between particular and universal. (p. 167)

Now on the last of the trio, perspective, Wheelwright has this to say:

> The two foregoing characteristics of reality as envisaged through the edium of poetry and the poetic consciousness...make it impossible to postulate a single type of reality as ultimate. The communication of presential and coalescent reality is not possible by relying on words with inflexible meanings; if it is achieved at all...the common words must be chosen and contextualized with discriminating suitability. (pp. 169-70)

To quote him further:

To think or speak about reality is always to do so through one perspective rather than another. and to compare one perspective with another must involve the adoption of a third perspective which will be only partly pervious to them both. (p. 170)

From the contextual and perspectival character of reality it follows that the nature of reality is intrinsically and ultimately hidden from any finite exploration...There is always, in any inquiry, something more than meets the eye, even the inner eye; the permanent possibility of extending one's imaginative awareness has no limits.

If reality is intrinsically latent and unwilling to give up its innermost secrets even to the most enterprising explorer, then the best we can hope to do is catch partisanglimpses, reasonably diversified, all of them imperfect, but some more suited to one occasion and need, others to another. (pp. 172-3)

Wordsworth once sang:

Imagination—here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech.
That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
At once, some lonely traveller, I was lost;

Prelude VI[8]

In his view, this power comes from God, the source of infinity, and as such representing Nature. Poetry, though a product of a finite human being, can and often does transcend human finiteness and soar to the heights of eternity.

Since the Industrial Revolution there appeared in the West a new trend in the study of literature to seek truth through analysis, in imitation of practices in physical sciences. The approach was highly fruitful in the field of science but when applied to literature, it had

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8) David Perkins, *English Romantic Writers* (Harvard University, 1967), p. 243.

the disturbing effect of leaving out something vital and central. By contrast, some traditional Oriental attitudes have been to seek knowledge of things and nature by identifying oneself with what one observes, in a totality of view which links man with nature, mind with matter. This is a synthetic and synoptic approach in distinct contrast with the analytical approach. Wheelwright is one of the Western scholars who probe for a new path to poetic reality; he seeks to continue the scientific method but from a different perspective of the oneness of the viewer and the view.