BRICK

A LITERARY JOURNAL

ALICE BLUE-GOWN

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Poetry and Meaninglessness
Part IV of IV: Why Meaning Matters

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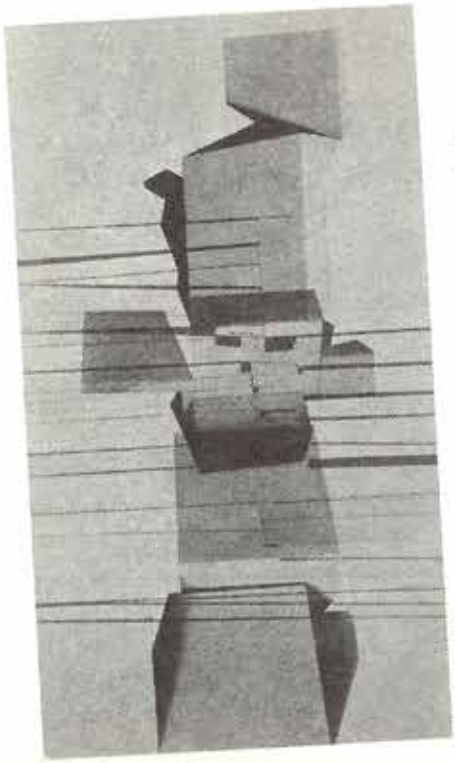

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Part I of this essay, published in Brick *97, explored the rise of meaningless poetry from high modernism and Dada through cut-up technique and flarf. Zwicky argued that a number of cultural factors contributed to this rise, reinforced by the pleasure the human mind derives from constructing coherent gestalts even when they aren't warranted. Crucial to her argument is the view that lyric poetry springs from the discernment of complex, non-linear structures in the world. Meaningful poetry, she maintains, uses language to point to such structures. Part II, published in* Brick *98, looked at skepticism about meaning, which stems from the absence of rules for detecting true gestalts. In Part III, Zwicky considered and dismissed the notion that free verse is responsible for the growth of meaningless poetry. Now, in Part IV, Zwicky discusses the subversion of meaning by technocracy and the increasing urgency, on the part of writers and readers, to attend well to meaning in literature and in the world.*

At the burial of an epoch
no psalm is heard at the tomb.
Soon nettles and thistles
will decorate the spot.
The only busy hands are those
of the gravediggers. Faster! Faster!
And it's quiet, Lord, so quiet
you can hear time passing.

— Anna Akhmatova

"'Meaningless' poetry. It's a tempest in a teapot!—Who cares? Poetry is a non-market genre."

Poetry may be a non-market genre. But meaning isn't. Meaning is not a genre at all. It's the iridescent, flowing substance of any life worth living. Our experience of meaning is not fundamentally linguistic either in structure or in content: it is a quasi-perceptual gestalt phenomenon. Because it is a gestalt phenomenon, the intellectual capacities involved in the experience of meaning can be disrupted if we try to analyze or describe them. This, it seems to me, has important consequences for a culture that values analysis and description as core features of intelligence. It also has consequences for our understanding of the natural world: the present planetary crisis is in large measure a result of our neglect of meaning. If, as either readers or writers, we abet this neglect, our practice is complicit.

τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι, said Father Parmenides. What is for meaning is for being. Or: the experience of meaning will, if you let it, tell you something about the nature of the world. The experience of meaning is the experience of a gestalt—either a shift to coherence out of chaos or a shift from one coherent arrangement to another, the perception of their resonant relation. That this experience is ubiquitous, that it is deeply pleasurable, and that the form of thought that underlies it is fundamental to accurate perception and to problem-solving of many kinds are good reasons for thinking it is evolutionarily adaptive.

There is hot debate about the details of evolutionary theory, but there is little doubt that most of the capacities a living being frequently displays are a reflection of what—given some initial constraints like having legs instead of roots—it needs to do in order to survive: respond to light, for example, or grab hold of things it wants to eat; sense the gravitational pull of the moon; pick up on the polarity of the earth's magnetic field. If gestalt comprehension is evolutionarily adaptive, it follows that resonant structures, wholes that hang together, are out there, just like light, graspable things to eat, the moon, and the earth's magnetic field. It follows that the world itself is made up, at least in part, of non-piecemeal resonant structures. In some respects, yes, it's built like a machine because that's another way of understanding it that appears to be evolutionarily adaptive. But the world is also built like a web of analogies. It is as much a piece of music as it is a pile of lumber.

A culture that denies or derogates gestalt comprehension will thus be missing out on an important way the world is. Its members won't just scoff at the notion of causality that underlies the *I Ching* or the possibility of navigating by songlines; their susceptibility to the beauty of ecological wholes

will be disparaged. People in such a culture will be encouraged to regard aspects of ecologies as facts; but they won't be encouraged to pick up on how or that those facts *matter*. The meaning of the facts will be obscured.

For the experience of natural beauty is yet another gestalt experience, deeply allied with meaning. Pick any of the notions that Enlightenment philosophy has been unable to crack but that, equally, it hasn't been able to make go away: meaning, certainly, and beauty; but also goodness; identity; being. You'll find that each is an idea or an experience that depends on gestalt rather than piecemeal thinking. I know next to nothing about quantum superposition and entanglement, nor about Rupert Sheldrake's morphic fields; but I'm struck by the fact that these allegedly inexplicable phenomena appear to be characterized by the kind of whole/part relationships that characterize gestalts. Perhaps we find these phenomena mysterious (or specious) because we're trying to cram them into an epistemic box into which they won't fit: maybe their apparent parts aren't like independent billiard balls, maybe they're structurally connected *aspects* of complex wholes. The exercise of cramming everything into the piecemeal thinking box is, however, an enterprise to which this culture is profoundly dedicated. The reasons for this dedication are many, but at least one of them may have to do with the evolution of ways of knowing. Piecemeal parts and their interactions are just what Indo-European languages and their writing systems seem designed to pick out and describe, and just what analyses are supposed to reveal. As students of both metaphysics and linguistics have noticed, the categories into which the world seems to parse itself bear a striking resemblance to grammatical structures in the language the parser speaks.

And the area of the human brain that controls speech production is overwhelmingly located in the hemisphere that controls the dextrous hand—the one that grasps things and manipulates them. This is not, I believe, an evolutionary accident. Language, too, can be used to divide the world into graspable chunks and to keep these chunks distinct from one another; it helps us hold the chunks still so we can analyze them, figure out standard cause-and-effect relationships among them, and then manipulate them—to feed ourselves, to keep ourselves safe, and warm, and dry. Used in this way, language is both the servant and the foundation of technology. It is the mental ghost of the grasping hand.

One of the striking features of gestalts is that they're hard to undermine. Unlike many of the results of calculative intelligence, they have a gravity that can pull unrelated details into orbit around them and that resists the disintegrating effects of counterevidence. Can they nonetheless be mistaken? Indeed. The *phi* phenomenon—and the little pop in your mind that can occur when you read a compilation of randomly chosen words and phrases—shows that gestalt comprehension can be profoundly mistaken. Isn't this grounds for distrusting it wherever it occurs?

Not unless it's also grounds for distrusting every form of reasoning. Most of us make mistakes in addition and subtraction, and some of us make them repeatedly. Does this lead us to give up on calculation? On the contrary. It leads us to double-check.

When I was a kid, someone told me that 96 percent of all once-accepted scientific claims have been proven wrong. I don't know where the figure 96 came from, but the true percentage has to be fairly high: earth-centred universes, or sun-centred universes with circular planetary orbits, in astronomy; occult forces in medieval physics and the collapse of Newtonian mechanics at subatomic levels; phlogiston in chemistry and humours in biology—the list of faulty paradigms, let alone sloppy measurements and mistaken taxonomies, is long. Yet we have no trouble believing in science. Bridges collapse, tailings ponds collapse, space shuttles explode, deep-sea oil wells explode. Yet we have no trouble trusting engineers. Gestalts—of which scientific paradigms are actually good examples—are no less trustworthy than other kinds of human knowledge. And the safeguard is the same as it is elsewhere: double-check. Or triple-check. Get someone else to check. Wait and check again. Shifting our position in time as well as in space can offer a salutary new perspective.

How can we be certain? *Absolutely* certain? We can't. This question is one of the oldest in philosophy, perhaps because the anxiety that underlies it runs deep. If we're to speak to that anxiety, we need to see that the logic of mistakes is a version of the logic of doubt: mistakes are not possible except against a background that is deemed reliable. The *concept* "mistake" entails that most of the time we get it right, that there's a correct account with respect to which the mistake is being made. "But surely," someone will ask, "if I've been mistaken before, I could be mistaken now. Or tomorrow. Or next Tuesday." Of course. But this does not license the exhilarating thought that maybe we're *always* mistaken. If we are mistaken *all* the time, we *aren't* mistaken all the time; we can't be. What we mean when we ask if we could be mistaken all the time is whether it's possible there's no mind-independent reality, nothing against which to measure what we think and seem to perceive. Yes, it's possible. It's possible that nothing exists but this second or two of experience. Do you want to live there? It seems to me a boring, brute, and ultimately cowardly way to deal with the tensions we discover in existence.

A mistake is a mistake only in relation to a network of truths we hold secure. Could that background network be wrong? Yes. I would argue it *has* been wrong, and in many ways still is wrong, in the case of secure beliefs about the nature of human beings of tribes or races not familiar to the believer, about the nature of female human beings, about the nature of non-human beings, just as it was wrong about the position of the earth relative to the sun. Perhaps some of you share my convictions. But how did we arrive at these culturally unpopular views? By checking the beliefs we were invited to hold against a background we held to be even more secure: our direct experience—what happens when we pay attention to human beings of other races or genders, what happens when we pay attention to non-human beings, what happens when we pay attention to what we're seeing through a telescope. But can't direct experience be coloured by racist, sexist, anthropocentric, or terracentric prejudice? Yes. And so we must struggle to be honest with ourselves. Paying attention is hard work. It takes courage—in some cases, to see what's there; in some cases, to admit we've been wrong. It

takes time. It takes patience. Knowledge—of any sort—is never just about facts; it is always a function of the interpenetration of facts and character. In other words, real knowledge is always a kind of wisdom. To understand reality, you not only have to search *it* out; you have to refine, strengthen, and clarify the instrument with which you search.

While there may be no recipe for the experience of meaning, there is nonetheless an answer to the question *How do we become proficient in gestalt comprehension?* The answer is: practise. In a reductive context, this reply may appear to be circular: how can we practise recognizing gestalts if we don't know how to recognize them in the first place? Yet it is just the answer Aristotle gave his fellow citizens about how to become virtuous, and he expected to be understood. Aristotle expanded a little: he suggested that you keep company with those known for excellence. You acquire some experience of how they go about their lives. Follow in their footsteps. Copy them. It's the same advice you'd give someone in fifteenth-century Florence who wanted to be a painter or to someone in an eighteenth-century Haida village who wanted to learn how to carve. In other words, becoming proficient in gestalt comprehension—like learning to be virtuous, learning to paint, learning to carve—is an *art*. There's no civilization in the world, except perhaps our own, that does not understand a great deal of learning in these terms.

Two features of artistic practice seem worth mentioning here. First, although talent helps, anyone can improve: that's what practice is for. Second, and crucially, becoming a good artist requires technique. The acquisition of technique involves—in painting, in music, in morals and mathematics—at least some analysis: focused, articulate reflection on what this tool does, what that hand position is good for, the definition of a concept, or confirmation of a guess through calculation. What has been made precise in this way is then taken up again into the practice as a whole. Part of what we practise is the interaction between analytic and gestalt intelligence.

In addition to encouraging people to practise gestalt comprehension if they want to get better at it, we can also say something about the *effect* of perceiving complex gestalts. The perception of complex resonant structure in the world changes us. This change is the litmus of the real. It is by attending to whether or not we have been changed by what we claim to know that we learn to distinguish between significant and insignificant gestalts. It is as though we ourselves have been realigned—as though our place in the shape of the whole has shifted. Often, even in difficult cases and when we can't say how or why, we can tell immediately that a change has taken place. Sometimes recognition takes years. In rare instances, we may never know for sure.

And sometimes, not often but sometimes, we make mistakes.

Putting up with uncertainty is the price we pay for making ourselves available to meaning.

Earlier, I mentioned that knowledge is a function of the interpenetration of facts and character. Character, too, as Aristotle might have said, is a gestalt concept—a complex integrated whole that is not a mere assemblage of parts. A person's character is not a recipe:

two parts vanity plus three parts determination and a dash of grumpiness, say; it's not something we acquire the way we acquire a closet full of clothes or a set of crockery. And our comprehension of another person's character has many of the subsidiary features of gestalt comprehension: it happens in a flash—we don't add it up. Also, it is hard to revise (think of the importance we attach to "first impressions"); and there's no method for teaching someone to be a good judge of character. The interdetermination of aspects of character is nothing static, and this is why we say good portraiture, portraiture that captures character, *lives*. Even though the painting or the photograph is still, it reveals dynamic interconnectedness: how if that shifts, this must shift too. It points to inner life.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called character *inscape*. It's a very suggestive word, the way it conjures "interior landscape"—its emphasis on the non-human and its sense of space, of vistas; complexities that shift with perspective; attunements that invite contemplation. Landscapes are not simply assemblages of trees, rocks, and water; they hang together in ways that are hard to analyze. Hopkins, for example, describes a line of fir trees as "melodious" and the long shoulder of a hill as a "slow tune." Melodies are where gestalt epistemology started; they are paradigmatic examples of gestalts. Here, the metaphors are especially telling: they speak of visual perception sung to by what it sees.

Hopkins himself provides no abstract definition of inscape. Here is how W. H. Gardner, quoting W. A. M. Peters, S.J., summarizes it: "that unified complex of characteristics, which constitute[s], 'the outward reflection of the inner nature of a thing.'" Hopkins also coined the word *instress* for the force or energy that sustains an inscape. Gardner elaborates: "*instress* is not only the unifying force *in* the object; it connotes also that impulse *from* the 'inscape' which acts on the senses. . . . Instress, then, is often the *sensation* of inscape—[an] . . . illumination, a sudden perception of that deeper pattern, order, and unity which gives meaning to external forms." The connection with

gestalt perception is both striking and obvious. Note that inscape and instress are explicitly identified as the source of meaning.

But this is the voice of a commentator, not Hopkins himself. How does Hopkins talk about inscape?

> Walked down to the Rhone glacier. It has three stages—first a smoothly-moulded bed in a pan or theatre of thorny peaks, swells of ice rising through the snow-sheet and the snow itself tossing and fretting into the sides

> of the rock walls in spray-like points: . . . it is like bright-plucked water swaying in a pail—; second, . . . was a ruck of horned waves steep and narrow in the gut: . . . a descending limb which was like the rude and knotty bossings of a strombus shell—; third the foot, a broad limb opening out and reaching the plain, shaped like the fan-fin of a dolphin or a great bivalve shell turned on its face, the flutings in either case being suggested by the crevasses[,] and the ribs by the risings between them, these being swerved and inscaped strictly to the motion of the mass.

Here the word *inscape* occurs as a verb, and it means the sculpting of an aspect by the action of the whole. Hopkins's language is shot through with, taken over by, the tumbling, shocking impact, the rush and sway of what he perceives. This is not the language of the grasping hand, language trying to hold experience still so we can figure out how to use it. This is language overtaken by integrated comprehension, charged, torqued, smelted by the need to mean.

Hopkins's work is full of this kind of attention to the natural world: kestrels, oak trees, ash trees, poplars, bluebells, the moon, pigeons, snow, clouds, the sea. The poems, even passages in the journals, can be difficult because the language is so bent, stretched, pressured. But there is no question that it is meaningful. Reading a Hopkins poem doesn't give you a little pop in the mind. It takes the top of your head off—and lets the world in.

Hopkins shows us the meanings of the things he attends to; he shows us *that* they mean. But it is just this—that the natural world has meaning—that the culture of technocracy denies. A technocracy is defined not by the quantity of its gadgets but by its refusal to regard gestalt comprehension as legitimate. In such a culture, the arts are thought of as entertainments; visual thinking in mathematics and the sciences is derogated; indigenous wisdom is dismissed as superstition; moral issues are treated as problems in cost-benefit analysis; the purpose of education is to get a job.

In such a culture, the beings that populate natural ecologies are regarded as resources, parts of a kind of biological machine. Developers and restoration specialists ask, "If we give you just as many trees, and just as many ponds, and bugs, and birds, what's your problem?" Our problem is that violence is being done to reality; meaning is being abused. But we are powerless to say this, often powerless even to recognize it, because the way of thinking on which it depends is not acknowledged as genuine. Our ability to experience things *as the gestalts they are* is dismissed and undermined.

Here is Hopkins again:

> The ash tree growing in the corner of the garden was felled. It was lopped first: I heard the sound and looking out and seeing it maimed there came at that moment a great pang and I wished to die and not see the inscapes of the world destroyed any more.

The inscapes of the world *are* being destroyed—at a geological pace just shy of a meteor impact. Meaning is not something we can ignore or make fun of in these circumstances. It is not something we should

feel free to confuse with "personal interpretation." We should not be satisfied with "little pops in the mind" when we need insight into reality. Poetry, along with the other arts, is now called, as it has been in other serious circumstances, to bear witness.

This does not mean that environmental catastrophe and the political, moral, and economic tyrannies that drive it are poetry's only worthy themes. It means that human work and human thinking must be attuned to the real, extra-human world rather than to possibilities of fame, or fun, or capturing the market. It also does not mean that there is no joy. There is always—always—light in the dark. It is part of our responsibility as artists to be alert to that light, to respond to it, and to name it truly.

Our responsibility as readers is also great. Our inner ear gives life to the music of the human mind. In this, there is also joy and remarkable beauty. We must not think of ourselves as consumers. Good literature delights and satisfies, but it is not commercial entertainment: its purpose is not to drug, nor to distract, nor to sell, and we should not measure it by those standards. We must not be afraid to cultivate reading as an art, a skill that we practise with delight certainly but also with the diligence, patience, and seriousness that make true delight possible. B

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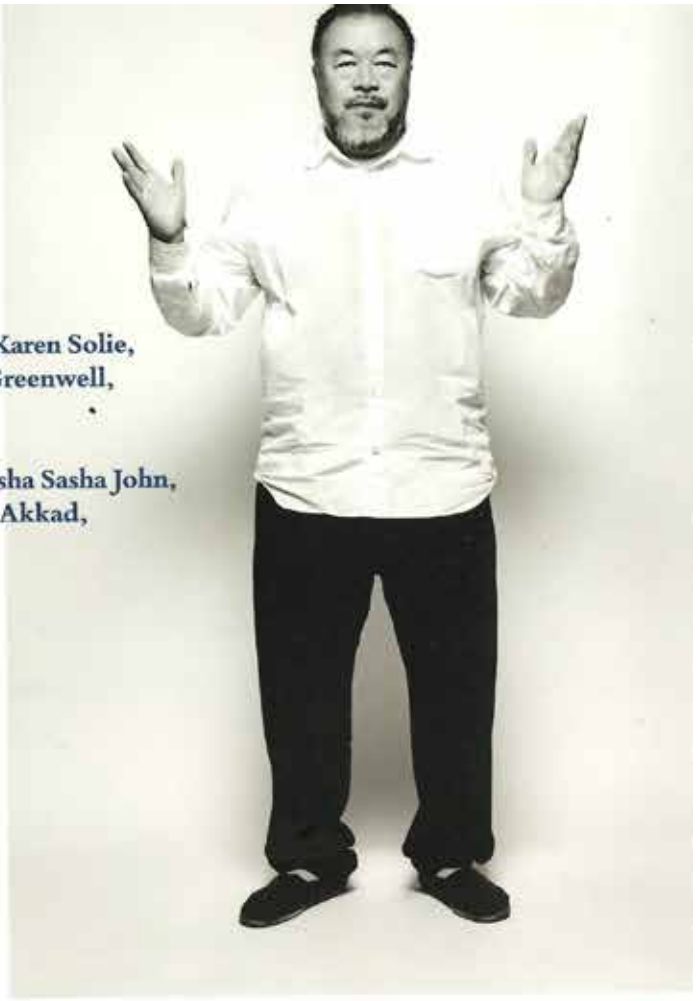

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