

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF STYLE

The Second Lecture from the Book:

## “The Problem of Style”

by John Middleton Murry

Comments by Ferrick Gray

## Prefatory Remarks

Recapping from Murry’s first lecture, **The Meaning of Style**, he gave three possible uses of the word **style**:

1. as personal idiosyncrasy;
2. as a technique of exposition; and
3. as the highest achievement of literature.

Personally, I believe the third to be very difficult to identify regardless of the attempt at definition. For me, it is more a personal opinion, but Murry may enlighten each of us as we progress through his lectures.

In this second lecture, **The Psychology of Style** he sums up his previous lecture, but his summary is phrased very differently, yet in itself, it is something quite extraordinary. I would say that his explanations are much better worded, supported, and his work as a whole is very passionate in what he relays. Admittedly, to a point, he recognizes the weakness in his previous propositions. He makes this statement before he moves on to examine his *conception of an originating emotion*.

If the conception has the merit of simplicity, it also has the disadvantage of vagueness; and you will already have caught me in the act of employing ‘emotion’ and ‘mode of experience’ as though they were synonymous. I have dilated and contracted the words to suit the convenience of my argument, without pausing to inquire whether this treatment is legitimate.<sup>1</sup>

1 John Middleton Murry (August 6, 1889—March 12, 1957), English writer and critic. Fourth Impression 1935. *The Problem of Style (The Psychology of Style, pp23, 24)*. Oxford U.P.

# The Conception of an Originating Emotion

Murry begins by putting forth the statement that most people would accept the premise that the *originating emotion* is a prime factor in the writing a lyrical poem. This would make sense as we would expect an event, object or person to inspire the writer in some way. In other words, there must be some source of inspiration. Without it nothing can be written at all.

Once this emotion has taken plant in the writer's mind and being, it is the attempt to put onto paper using the most appropriate devices. In the case of the poet, if not the best, it may well be that the poet chooses the wrong device, but mostly at this time, in the traditional sense it will be meter and rime.

There are many things that occur in the process of writing a poem, and the *originating emotion* may often prove difficult to put into words. For this to happen, every word must have its place and of course relevance to the emotion itself. The entire meaning and feeling of the poem can be easily lost if careful consideration of words and their placement is not taken into account. If this is done successfully, the rhythm of the poem will naturally follow. It cannot be otherwise.

As we know and Murry states, the process of composition may be *mysterious*. The originating emotion may not come to the forefront, but it is the underlying theme of the piece, the force or genesis behind the whole, you might say. It is then a matter for the poet to continue to express this emotion so that the reader becomes aware of in some manner, the *originating emotion*.

## Dramatic Poems and Novels

We have, almost by definition, that *lyric* poetry is the most appropriate way to express personal emotion. Murry's question is now: *What of the literature that is impersonal?*

Murry make reference of Shakespeare's<sup>2</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra*, (which he calls a *perfect* play) to Hardy's<sup>3</sup> *A Broken Appointment*. It is clear that each has come about in a very different manner. With Hardy's poem, it was an originating emotion whereas in the case of Shakespeare, he more or less deliberately chose his theme *rather more than less deliberately*. In the case of Shakespeare the *emotional disturbance was self-provoked*. There is clearly a different process of initial engagement going on here, and Murry introduces the phrase *modes of experience* to cover processes of this kind.

## Modes of Experience

Murry makes a number of points here, in at least an attempt to justify that the *disturbance* is different to an *originating emotion*.

- A literary artist starts off (their career) with more than *ordinary* sensitiveness.
- Objects and episodes in life produce a deepened and more precise impression than upon *ordinary* people.

I am surprised that Murry uses the word *ordinary* in such a way that it can be interpreted in a negative sense. Indeed, his use is not as precise as it may well have been. I doubt that it is used in the sense of *law*, but more so as *uninteresting* or *common*. Some may well take offense to this usage, but it would have sat well in a university lecture (for obvious reasons). Of course, Murry may also be implying that a literary artist is of a different breed, but the insinuation is still present, or at least possible. A minor point, but noted since we are to be precise in what we wish to say. We would also notice his reference to Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* as *perfect*, but

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2 William Shakespeare (c. April 23, 1564—April 23, 1616), English playwright and poet.

3 Thomas Hardy (June 2, 1840—January 11, 1928), English novelist and poet.

there is no qualification to support his statement.<sup>4</sup>

Murry continues, but this time in more substantial terms. Unless we consider a simple and immediate reaction to the stimulus, the effect is that they will at some stage compound to produce something far more potent. The creative literary artist does not generalize, as in abstractions.

However, we have this *attitude to life* which is still predominantly emotional as it is influenced by objects, people &c. that have brought forward the emotion. The artist themselves have not decided in any path by pure logical reasoning or decision.

We are reminded that it was Matthew Arnold<sup>5</sup> who created his famous criterion for a great master of literature and the highest kind of poetry being the *criticism of life*.

Now this in itself comes as a very obscure criterion for the *highest kind of poetry*. It is not something that is easily comprehended since it comes as making a momentous and rather unrelated leap. Why in particular do we concern ourselves with the *criticism of life*? It seems such an absurd idea to use as any form of criterion for an artist of any description.

The *criticism of life* is more an intellectual activity which we may associate with philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and perhaps Heidegger, but this was not what Arnold was referring to. Albeit the poet may at times become somewhat philosophical in their verses, the two are very different.

We find that Arnold's criterion was based more on specific poets he chose to write about rather than poets in general. This point is not bad in itself, but it can be somewhat deceptive and a little confusing. I would doubt that all poets, or at least the majority, would criticize life as we understand it to be. How we interpret *criticize life* is still left open to scrutiny by the masses.

The great writer does not really come to conclusions about life; he discerns a quality in it. His emotions, reinforcing one another, gradually form in him a habit of emotion; certain kinds of objects and incidents impress him with a peculiar weight and significance.

In general this may be true, but we all come to conclusion about life in some way either by contemplation or experience. Whether we discern a quality in it is another matter. It is this *emotional bias* that Murry calls a writer's *mode of experience*.

In some ways Murry's discussion tends toward what I call a *quasi-religious experience* with his reference to the soul and psychological makeup. This may well be the internal being of every writer, but the same can be said about those who are not writers. Considering the circumstances at the time of writing, this may have appealed to many, but maybe not so much today. We should note that Murry did write a lot of books geared toward Christianity, the church and God, so his references here are not surprising.

The greater the writer, the more continuous does that apprehensive condition of the soul become.

As for the light thrown on the psychology of a creative writer, Murry quotes Wordsworth<sup>6</sup> from the preface of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*:

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4 We should note that his preference does occur in some of his other works.

5 **Matthew Arnold** (December 24, 1822—April 15, 1888), English poet and critic.

6 **William Wordsworth** (April 7, 1770—April 23, 1850), English poet and laureate.

All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, has also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be considered with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such nature and in such connexion with each other, that the understanding of the reader must necessarily be in some degree heightened and his affections strengthened and purified.

Now this appears to be a very long-winded way of saying that poetry is based on past experiences, and for whatever reason, the poet deems them important enough to write about them. The hopeful result being that the reader will be able to relate to the poem and poet.<sup>7</sup> Within all of this we find that Wordsworth is placing more emphasis on the part played by *thought*, and not of any particular *rational process*. Thus Murry summarizes:

The thoughts in the mind of a great poet are chiefly the residue of remembered emotions.

which fits much better with his conception of *modes of experience*.

Even though the consideration of different subjects may play a role in determining how the writer goes about their work, it essentially comes down to what is important to the writer. However, this form of intellect may be more obvious or more important to some writers than others and this determines their *mode of experience*, or at least that which has some effect on their writing.

## More on Plays and Novels

The major difference between a poem and play or novel is in the experiences of the writer. Whereas the poem may be more inclined to emotional bias, the play and novel comes about very differently. The *plot* requires a more intellectual approach. A plot can be based on the writer's experiences, but it may also be *borrowed* from another writer's experiences. All of this relates back to the *maturity* of the writer. We may assume that the older the writer, the more on which to base their work, whereas the younger is more inclined or *confined* to a narrower field of experiences and indeed interests. This may appear to be a correct assumption, and it is quite logical, but it is not entirely correct. His statement relies on the fact that the younger have not been influenced by the older. By this I mean that the younger writer may be well-read in that they have been exposed to great writers of the past, and possibly present. Purely by reading other works, writers become exposed to those experiences that have been written about. Such is the case, we may actually subsume these experiences from another. They are not ours, but they may be experienced in a mental fashion if we are opened to them or capable.

We may consider the *plot* as an incident of life. It may well be from history or legend, from circumstances eventuating from every day life or something completely fictitious, that is, made up by the writer themselves. The point is that it really does not matter. What is more important is to acknowledge that there is more intellectual activity involved other than the expression of purely emotional aspects.

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<sup>7</sup> We should remember that Wordsworth had a very high opinion of himself, and less for others. Hence the verbosity to impress his point of view.

Regardless, the plot still must come from somewhere, and it still stems from past experience. Murry furthers this with what appears to be a rather outlandish statement in that there is very little difference between *realistic* and *romantic* or *imaginative* writing.

Realistic and imaginative writing is acceptable, but the point of romantic does seem very out of place in the overall picture. He does explain the difference in that the realistic is from every day life, and the romantic is from an *imagined continuation of life into the past, or into a purely ideal world*. But what will make a writer a *great* writer?

Murry goes out on a limb and states that all *great* realistic writers must also be romantic, and the *great* romantic writer also realist. Is this an absurd and ridiculous statement? What is he alluding to? On the surface it may be, but I believe Murry has hit on something very significant, or of at least for some consideration.

From the romantic point of view, we are looking at a period of time more so than a feeling of romance. But in saying this, the feeling of romance is in some manner appropriate. *Romanticism* also known as the *Romantic Movement* or *Romantic Era*, was an artistic and intellectual movement originating towards the end of the eighteenth century. Its main purpose was that of imagination, nature in society and culture. It was more of a moral outlook of individualism. Basically, all of this evoked a strong emotional response which is what Murry is driving at. All of this is coming back to a peculiar *originating emotion*.

## Great Works

We may like to have clear-cut definitions and motives, but the critic may not be always able to define what it is about the writer, even though they may be aware of it. It is the difficulty of trying to put one's thoughts into words. In other words, to articulate what we feel. To be able to understand where a writer is coming from, we must be well-versed with the work of the writer. It is not something to be taken on face value. We have, in a way needs to become the writer themselves. We *must* become a miniature or somewhat a minor, albeit insignificant *replica of the being*.

Whether we like it or not, great works will never yield their greatness unless we work our way through them. This requires time and patience. It is only when we have done this that we can truly say that we understand what the writer was about, and what they wished to impart to the reader.

What we can say is that the highest style is when the current meanings of the word *style* blend. This means a combination of the *maximum personality* with the *maximum of impersonality*. This in itself seems rather impossible. One, it is the *concentration of personal emotion* and on the other it is a *complete projection of this personal emotion into the created thing*.

In some ways, Murry has not been able to elucidate what he is trying to say, and it all comes as contradictory, or at the very least absurd. You may even say that there is a paradox of sorts.

This all seems very vague, and so it is. How is it that both attributes can exist in the one work? What is regarded as perfection is in the eye of the beholder. That is to say, not everyone will agree. The maximum personality is to implant one's own character upon the pieces, but the maximum of impersonality is to divorce one's self from the piece entirely. Is this truly possible?

It is difficult to say, but the writer will have great difficulty explaining this concept. Eliot also spoke of this phenomenon, but it is not until you hear Eliot<sup>8</sup> read his poetry that you have gained a little insight and appreciate the concept. It is an unusual ability to express the emotional, but to detach oneself personally from what has been written. To this point it would appear that they have not been a willing participant in the creation of the work.

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8 T. S. Eliot (Thomas Sterns), (September 26, 1888—January 4, 1965). Poet, playwright, essayist and critic.

It is all very well to take extracts from Shakespeare as Murry does, but it is another to compare with another writer, whether it be Keats, Shelley or Byron or anyone else within a similar time period, or of the present. Indeed any other writer. One interprets a piece as they understand it. There is no comparison possible between different writers of the same, apart from form or sentiment. To do this implies that any and every piece can only be read one way, which we know is impossible. The writer may well give the circumstances one way, but the reader will not necessarily see it the same way since they base the reading according to their own experiences.

Murry takes a lot of leeway in his appreciation for Shakespeare, something with which not all readers will agree. Nevertheless in his defense, we must agree that Shakespeare was a genius in not only his poems, but his plays and the techniques he employed. The record conclusively shows this.

We should agree that ultimately, the plot is the writer's, so too the events and the characters. All from the imagination of the writer. In some cases the writer will try to suppress their personal emotions. Well the unimportant ones at least, yet they will still raise their presence in what is written. There is still a little of the writer in everything they put to paper.

Murry finishes his lecture with a somewhat unexpected statement, but one which we would gratefully deem as appropriate:

An emotion which has not the endorsement of an attitude has a trick of dissolving away in the mere act of expression; it will more often leave you with fine writing than it will leave you with style.

*Style*, once again has become somewhat elusive in its being. We have the general idea and understanding, but its straightforward definition has evaded us. Regardless of emotion, are we truly able to say with confidence, what the difference is between *fine writing* and *style*?

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