

‘No great statement about reality [...] can be static, like simple information’: Literary Language and Reality

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Abstract. This paper sets out the implications of Marilynne Robinson’s statement of the title, with reference to the work of former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. It is notable that Robinson and Williams are themselves creative writers — Robinson a novelist and Williams a poet — as well as academics who write on language, Christian theology, and aesthetics. I claim in this paper that Robinson’s statement is suggestive for thinking about the kind of language required to articulate, intimate, and imagine or conceive of ‘reality’. Robinson takes as assumed that ‘reality’ ought to have a ‘great statement’ made about it, indicating that such reality bears on what we might think of as, and what Robinson would no doubt call, the sacred — a term she believes necessary to human life.¹ Such ‘reality’ resists a ‘static’ or simply informative definition or description, meaning that the functional, transactional terms of everyday language are neither adequate nor appropriate. What kind of language can achieve or point towards recognition of reality, such that the rich mystery of that reality, too, be acknowledged?

Writing of Shakespeare in 2015, Marilynne Robinson declared that ‘no great statement about reality [...] can be static, like simple information’.² The idea is that only a particular mode of using language is able to communicate or to give a sense of reality; further, that whatever form such language takes, it cannot be ‘static’. What is ‘static’ language? It is the language of ‘simple information’: language that is purely propositional and functional, whose role and purpose is to inform. Language that is not ‘static’ will not only have purposes other than the informative: not being static also means that the form the language assumes is vital to what is communicated, such that the resonances of the language themselves have a communicative function. Robinson’s claim is therefore about both language’s relationship to reality and the form it is necessary for such language to take.

¹ Thomas Schaub, ‘An Interview with Marilynne Robinson’, *Contemporary Literature*, 35.2 (1994), 231–51 (p. 251).

² Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), p. 45.

The way language is used is of the utmost importance for thinking about and imagining reality. We do literature an injustice if we think of it as representing reality (an impossible task); rather, it creates a mode of relating to reality that would not otherwise exist. How one thinks about reality, and the kind of attitude one has towards it, can be changed and shaped through language. Denis Donoghue argues that there is a movement from 'circumstance' to 'experience': 'The test of an experience is that it indeed alters the structure of our feeling: if it doesn't, it hasn't been an experience, merely a circumstance.'³ Donoghue is not distinguishing between circumstance and experience as if they are objectively different; he is saying that the difference between them depends on us. Circumstance can become experience, but in order for that to take place, it must alter the structure of our feeling. For something to become 'experience' requires self-awareness and understanding, while 'circumstance' refers to something that remains merely a happening, which does not have an internal impact at all. Further, the way that feeling is altered is never uniform and will always be in some manner creative, not 'static'. There is an aspect of agency in Donoghue's words, for one chooses, however unconsciously or unintentionally, the kind of experience that a circumstance is able to become; one determines the narrative of its impact, which also means that it is possible, though it might take much work (therapeutic or otherwise), to change that narrative, and so to alter the impact.

The role of language here is powerful. The articulation (written or spoken) of one's accustomed or habitual modes of relating to experience can enable one to assess and evaluate them, and, eventually, also to change them. Words therefore form an important element of what Donoghue is talking about. They can form a practice of grappling with and gaining a deeper understanding of one's response to a particular event or happening. F. R. Leavis wrote in the 1930s that

What we diagnose in expression, as inadequacy in the use of words, goes back to an inadequacy behind the words, an inadequacy of experience; a failure of something that should have pressed upon them and controlled them to sharp significance.⁴

It would be a mistake to interpret this as a bald, and evidently incorrect, assertion that failure to express is failure to experience. Leavis's criticism, as I have argued elsewhere, is deeply invested in the role that a work assigns to its words and in analysing the conception of language that such a role suggests.⁵ For him the role implicitly ascribed to words by an author's work is as important a subject of critical investigation as what the words actually do. His literary criticism, that is, investigates attitude to language as well as

³ Denis Donoghue, 'Radio Talk', in *The State of the Language*, ed. by Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 547.

⁴ F. R. Leavis, *For Continuity* (Cambridge: The Minority Press, 1933), pp. 50–51.

⁵ Emily Holman, 'Literature, Language, and the Human: A Theoretical Enquiry, with Reference to the Work of F. R. Leavis' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2017).

language itself. Here he is talking about what he believes to be the writer's task: using words specifically for the purpose of relating to reality. Not all writers would accept this as their undertaking, but Leavis's criticism concerns itself fundamentally with how words and experience relate, and what he captures here about how language works and why we are invested in it is significant. Leavis sees the precise use of language as itself a practice, an act of engaging with one's ways of seeing and of conceiving. The careful and deliberate use of language is what enables something to have 'sharp significance': to become meaningful, even constitutive. The 'experience' that he alludes to here is akin to Donoghue's experience, something that has developed out of and significantly exceeds circumstance. What Leavis calls 'an inadequacy of experience' is an inadequate attention to one's relationship to reality, to the kinds of attitude one has towards it, and to the kinds of impact upon one it has. He conceives of language as a means to, as much as a mode of, becoming aware of how one relates to reality, and therefore also a means to and mode of potentially changing that relationship.

Another way of putting this is that what is given in a poem or prose work is always a relationship to reality that is mediated in some form or another: a relationship that is *attitudinal*. I take the deepening of one's sense of 'the way things have significance', as Charles Taylor puts it, as a morally significant gain: one that can determine the kinds of senses of reality we have, and so also affect how we live.⁶ In attending to literature's relationship to reality, what we are really attending to is the attitude to living that a text generates. Literature, through its language, creates and enables a mode of relating to reality that would not otherwise exist, because it depends on that particular use of language, on what Wittgenstein called 'these words in these positions.'⁷ When René Wellek observed that Leavis, in his criticism, 'very quickly leaves the verbal surface to which he is committed to respond, in order to discuss the leading sentiment, the attitude, the morality, and the philosophy of his author', he was both identifying and missing something vitally important.⁸ For Leavis, the 'verbal surface' is 'the leading sentiment, the attitude, the morality'. The investigation of the attitude a text generates is not separate from the examination of the words, as a key remark in Leavis's essay on Jonathan Swift reiterates. He speaks of the 'arrangement of words on the page and their effects, the emotions, attitudes and ideas that they organize.'⁹ Both words and what they 'organize', Leavis is saying, are ripe for analysis, precisely because of the inextricability of their relationship. When we examine words, we are also examining the emotions, ideas, and attitudes that they generate, because these things do not exist separately from the words themselves. Attending to the language entails a

⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 34.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 152e.

⁸ René Wellek, 'Review of F. R. Leavis', *The Modern Language Review*, 76.1 (1981), 175–80 (p. 179).

⁹ F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), p. 76.

scrutiny of the sense of reality the words of a text engender, which is to say, the kind of attitude they create. What is the mode of a text's relation to life; what idea of life does it generate; how does the reality it presents persuade us of its reality, or fail to do so; how does it deepen or fail to deepen our ideas of our emotions, concepts, and experiences; how does it communicate its thought and the pattern of its thinking?

A vision of one's mode of using language as inextricably bound up with conveying a particular sense of reality brings us closer to what Robinson is getting at. Language assists thinking and performs an important clarificatory role: so much is commonly accepted. But literary language does more than clarify: it can expand one's mind beyond conventional known patterns of thinking, operating as it does through evocation, association, and suggestion, rather than statement or counter-statement. Repetition, momentum, rhythm, and the numerous components of what is called 'form' or 'style', including sentence- and paragraph-length, syntax, and punctuation, not to mention point of view and tense, are fundamental to the way literature works and to the way it generates its felt meaning. As Rowan Williams puts it, art can 'open up' realms of imagining not otherwise available.¹⁰ Purely functional or representational language is likely to engender a purely functional or representational, a 'static', sense of reality. The way language is used, in other words, matters deeply; it can prompt the realest of effects. Williams associates change in language with a change in personhood altogether, asking 'what if conversion meant not just taking on a new vocabulary and new ideas but a new style of talking?'.¹¹ Note that a change in content-properties only (vocabulary and ideas) would not be sufficient; the true mark of a change is one of a property of form ('style'). Only that kind of change would betray the change in attitude that marks a genuine shift, a genuine movement. The attitudinal change itself constitutes the real transformation in perception of meaning, and so also in mode of relating to reality.

Williams argues that one must always try to be 'looking or listening here for speech that will affirm and open the way to life, for speech that can be playful and not just useful, for words that disturb and change us not because they threaten but because they "fit" a reality we are just beginning to discern'.¹² He suggests that the connection between language and reality is so close that if language is altered, the kind of reality one is 'just beginning to discern' may be lost. That is, part of the process of discerning a new reality takes place through attention to language and usage of 'open[ing]' modes of speech: a new relationship to reality might be enabled through a new usage of language. For Williams, this 'new style' of language is found most commonly in creative literature, particularly scripture and poetry. In his Clark lectures on aesthetics,

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity* (Harrisburg, PA: Continuum, 2006), p. 26.

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2004), pp. 70–71.

¹² *Ibid.*

he quotes Jacques Maritain's assertion that 'Poetry is ontology', glossing the French Thomist as saying that poetry 'has to do with our knowledge of being itself'.¹³ Art 'is inescapably a claim about reality', says Williams; it 'set[s] out to change the world', by 'chang[ing] it into itself'.¹⁴ That enigmatic-sounding statement is, I believe, suggesting that art generates a sense of what the world is like that continues to influence how one thinks about the world and about experience even when the art is no longer present. Art does not aim, Williams says,

at the stimulating of particular felt response: it speaks to intelligence, inviting intelligence to recognize its truth. It demands — in an extended but still exact sense — contemplation, the intellect being shaped by the impress of truth in such a way that the impress of truth on the artistic mind or imagination is continued through the work (but *only* through the work, not through an idea that can be abstracted from the work or through the artist's gloss on their own production). And in all these ways, the work not only challenges appearances; it challenges pre-existing assumptions about knowledge itself. It makes claims about being but also about how being is adequately known.¹⁵

Note Williams's care in emphasising the essential role of the work itself — '*only* through the work' — in prompting contemplation and enabling an understanding of its truth. He is highlighting the fact that abstractions of the work's meaning, like paraphrases of its content, end by forfeiting meaning, because they overlook form, which is where meaning in its specificity is found. Such abstractions disregard attitude (the 'way' things are), and therefore subtler, more intricate meanings, the kind of meanings that are suggested rather than stated, accumulating resonance rather than declaring their power. Williams writes: 'The signification of the words is neither conceptual nor representational; it is the positing of a world in which these words "catch" and establish certain relations or resonances'.¹⁶ The words themselves create the attitudinal and atmospheric context that can recognise their importance and distinctiveness. Change the words, and the meaning is changed, because the experience of meaning is changed. Focusing on a work itself and not on its propositional content means attending to things such as tone, pace, punctuation, syntax, and voice, even where the semantic content of two sentences might appear to be identical. A paraphrase will lose important attitudinal nuances that, far from being additional or decorative, are paramount to the felt generation of meaning. In terms of mode of relating to experience, the variations between one way and another will depend on and derive from these more intangible but nevertheless significant aspects of how meaning is created. '[C]ertain relations or resonances' will not be established in a different formulation of words.

For Williams, 'the artistic task [...] is to open up knowledge otherwise

¹³ See Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930), p. 91.

¹⁴ Williams, *Grace*, pp. 16–17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

unavailable'.¹⁷ '[O]rdinary realism' fails in that task because it merely represents or reproduces, 'in a way that takes for granted where [the world's] boundary lines are drawn by our ordinary conceptual mapping'.¹⁸ Ordinary realism does not generate anything new. The idea that it is not just art's role, but its essence, to 'open up' beyond the 'boundary lines' suggests that art has the most intimate of relations with the way we perceive and conceive of the world. Art, if it is art, should be touching one's modes of thinking and of feeling (not just one's thoughts and feelings), as well as prompting previously unimagined, uninhabited attitudes towards experience.

Speaking specifically of poetry, Williams describes its ability 'to bring out relations and dimensions that ordinary rational naming and analysing fail to represent'.¹⁹ Literary language can make suggestions that a more functional presentation of reality cannot perceive, let alone 'bring out'. The breaking of customary habits of perception is something that literary language can accomplish, as Viktor Shklovsky famously recognised in 'Art as Technique'.²⁰ Shklovsky speaks of literature as defamiliarizing; he offers the well-known formulation that literature can make the stoniness of a stone felt again, in ways that ordinary reality fails to provide. But Williams, like Robinson, goes further than Shklovsky. Language can make the stone *stonier*, perhaps: felt more fully than it would usually be, in ways that have a permanent effect on one's way of seeing stones thereafter. Maritain writes that 'things are not only what they are'; they 'give more than they have'.²¹ A different kind of vision must be enabled in order to allow such giving to take place and to bear fruit. Williams describes Geoffrey Hill's long poem *Tenebrae* (1978), which is on the extinguishing of candles on Good Friday, the day of Christ's crucifixion, as presenting the 'ontology [...] of a universe that is inextricably both material and significative, where things matter intensely, but matter in ways that breach boundaries and carry significance beyond what they tangibly are'.²² Carrying significance beyond something's tangibility is the speciality of literary language, through the attitude it generates and the experience of meaning it creates. The deepening of reality created by the artist's vision, the mode of seeking it prompts in the reader, is what enables things to 'give more than they have'.

What does Williams mean by 'open[ing] up'? He uses the term to refer to the relationship between words and thought, words and knowledge, or words and meaning. He repeatedly uses the language of *opening* as if another term might misrepresent those relationships, denying both how words work and how their

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

²⁰ *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 3–24; Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. by Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1993), pp. 1–14.

²¹ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 127.

²² Williams, *Grace*, p. 75.

meanings are formed. In literary scholarship, there are two prevalent terms for invoking this relationship. One is 'enactment'. Here is part of John Donne's 'Satire 3':

On a huge hill,
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must, and about must go;
And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so;²³

Donne is speaking of truth that is reached only in roundabout ways: 'about must, and about must go' is a well-known instance of words *enacting* meaning, the repetition, numerous clauses, and inverted syntax being as roundabout as what is spoken of. Yet the idea of words enacting meaning, though suggestive, is not especially helpful for thinking about how words and meaning relate to each other. There is not an existing meaning which words then imitate. *Enact* suggests sequence: that first one exists, then the other: that a known meaning is reflected in, or amplified by, an ingenious use of words — however expertly that might take place. Yet we do not know what the meaning is until we hear or read the words. To say that they are *enactive* of meaning is actually to say that word and meaning are separate, which is not the case in any usage of words that is not straightforwardly referential or representational (and, I believe, is a key feature distinguishing good from less good creative writing).

A more current term in literary scholarship is *embody*. The term is useful because of the aspect of physicality it stresses. Yet the problem with embodiment is similar; it, too, suggests a sequential relationship. Language, as Williams writes, is 'an embodied phenomenon, rooted in physical negotiations and transactions, both internal and external'.²⁴ The word *embodiment* is less useful for capturing what literary language does and how it operates. The kinaesthetic aspect of language justifies us talking of an embodied experience in reading literature, but not of literature itself *embodying* a particular idea. For literature to embody an idea suggests that the idea is well expressed and conveyed in these words, that it is well captured, that the idea has found the right form. It obscures the role form might have in *creating* the idea, such that something new is *generated* through particularities of form. For something to be embodied in form is quite different. *Embodiment* closes, a perfect fit of word to thing, rather than presenting the possibility that ideas and concepts might be, as Williams says, *opened* through expression. The term does not break radically enough with the idea of form as external, even though it speaks of form as body and not as decoration. An idea *embodied* is still an idea whose body is conceptually, if not physically, separate.

Williams's invocation of poems 'open[ing] up knowledge otherwise unavailable' is analogous to what I call *enabling*, with words enabling meanings that

²³ John Donne, *The Complete English Poems* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1983), p. 163.

²⁴ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014), p. 19.

do not otherwise exist.²⁵ This is not to say that word creates reality, but that a particular meaning generated by a sequence of words unfolding in time is *sui generis*. *Enable* not only describes how word and meaning relate, but how literature might relate to knowledge of reality. Understanding literature in this way itself stimulates thought about how a new use of language can open up space in perceptual and conceptual worlds, such that we might be able to experience in fresh and unforeseen ways because of what language enables for us and opens in us.²⁶

Poems, says Williams, 'change the landscape of language so that space appears'.²⁷ For Robinson too, literary language is something essentially enabling:

When I wrote *Housekeeping* [...], I made a world remote enough to allow me to choose and control the language out of which the story was to be made. It was a shift forced on me by the intractability of the language of contemporary experience — which must not be confused with contemporary experience itself. [...] The language of present experience is so charged with judgment and allusion and intonation that it cannot be put to any new use or forced along any unaccustomed path. The story it wants to tell I do not want to tell.²⁸

Robinson sees language as having an obligation to allow the richness of reality, especially the richness of one's lived experience of reality, to emerge, and, more so, to be felt. Her 2008 Terry lectures focused on 'the exclusion of the felt life of the mind' from contemporary public modes of speaking.²⁹ Robinson fears that a 'systematically reductionist conceptual vocabulary', that of positivism, has overwhelmed public discourse, something that results in a 'truncated model of human being'.³⁰ In 'Reclaiming a Sense of the Sacred', she focuses on the ability to 'feel reality on a set of nerves', reality 'in all its mystery and distinctiveness': terms far removed from what is suggested by 'static'.³¹ Repeatedly, Robinson's work suggests that a use of language that is 'static' impinges on our sense of, and even our capacity to imagine and to experience (in Donoghue's sense), reality itself — including being able to perceive daily reality as itself sacred. To intimate something of the depths of reality, for both Williams and Robinson, is a duty, one which entails using language not only responsibly, but creatively. *Creatively* does not necessarily mean poetry or fictional prose, but it does mean language that 'open[s]' reality, rather than taking it for granted or closing

²⁵ Williams, *Grace*, p. 26.

²⁶ For a more extensive discussion of these three terms, see Holman, 'Literature, Language, and the Human', pp. 147–59 and *passim*.

²⁷ Rowan Williams, 'Foreword', in Gavin D'Costa and others, *Making Nothing Happen* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. xi–xii (p. xi).

²⁸ Marilynne Robinson, 'Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy', *The New York Times*, 13 October 1985.

²⁹ Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

³⁰ Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, p. xiii; p. xiv.

³¹ Marilynne Robinson, 'Reclaiming a Sense of the Sacred', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 February 2012.

down its possibilities: language that enables the mystery of reality also to be felt.

For Robinson, the great statement about reality ‘implies a profound relationship that unfolds continuously and compels, among other things, extraordinary self-awareness’.³² What drives and requires ‘extraordinary self-awareness’, that is, is fresh language: language that operates differently to the functional language of convention, proposition, and ‘simple information’. ‘Static’ language is not language that ‘unfolds continuously’, working through intimation, evocation, and atmosphere as much as through semantics. The continuous ‘unfold[ing]’ — note the emphasis on activity — is not gestural or flimsy. It is not insubstantial, as Pope Pius XII indicated it might be in a crude contrast of the strong language of proposition with the weak language of suggestion.³³ To the contrary: the unfolding ‘compels’. Compelling through suggestion is important for Robinson. She writes that

Shakespeare gives grace a scale and aesthetic power, and a structural importance, that reach toward a greater sufficiency of expression — not a definition or a demonstration of grace or even an objective correlative for it, but the intimation of a great reality of another order, which pervades human experience, even manifests itself in human actions and relations, yet is always purely itself.³⁴

The Jamesian-Wittgensteinian idea that authors show, rather than tell or say, has become axiomatic. But Robinson seeks something different, neither definition, demonstration, nor T. S. Eliot’s objective correlative: rather, ‘intimation[s]’ that accumulate into meaning. Such meaning has the advantage of not being final or closed; it is something ‘that presents itself, reveals itself, always partially and circumstantially, accessible to only tentative apprehension, which means that it is always newly meaningful’.³⁵ What Robinson’s ‘great statement about reality’ asserts is that the kind of language used to intimate reality has the utmost significance in determining which ideas and experiences of reality, and what attitudes towards it, we are able, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually, to begin to grasp.

³² Robinson, *Givenness*, p. 45.

³³ Pope Pius XII pitted the ‘extravagant imagination’ against ‘clear description and solution of questions, accurate definition of concepts, clear-cut distinctions’. See Gerald Bednar, *Faith as Imagination* (Kansas: Sheed & Ward, 1996), p. 40.

³⁴ Robinson, *Givenness*, p. 34.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 241.