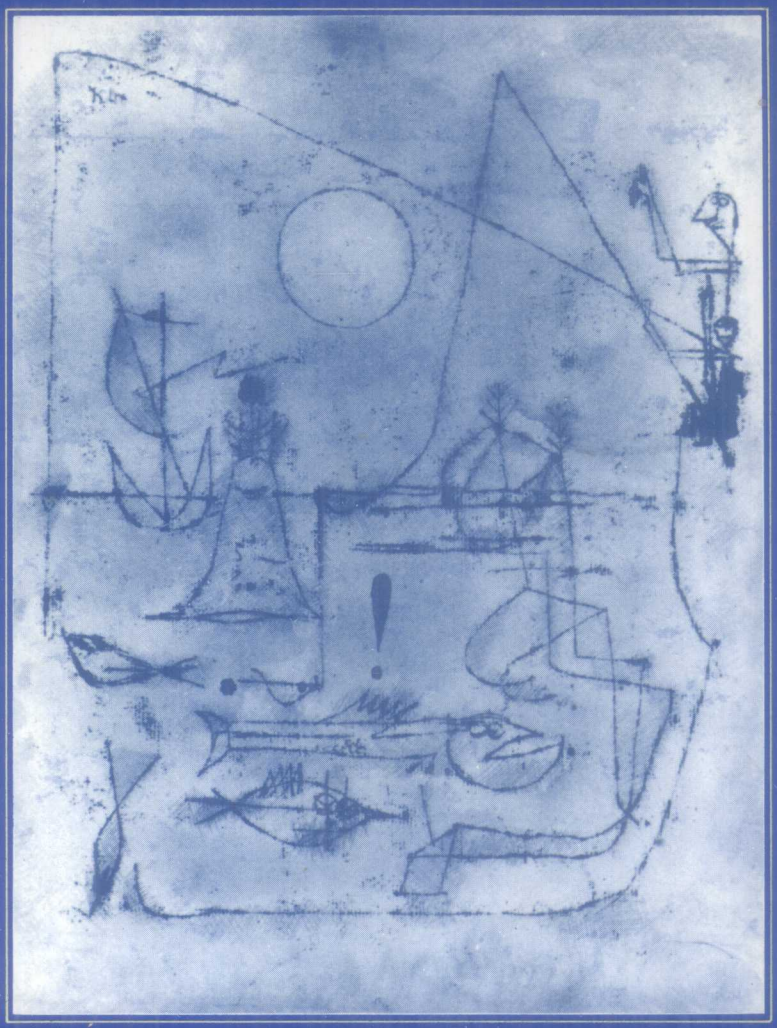
— GEORGE WHALLEY —

STUDIES IN LITERATURE AND THE HUMANITIES

INNOCENCE OF INTENT



SELECTED AND INTRODUCED BY BRIAN CRICK AND JOHN FERNS

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GEORGE WHALLEY

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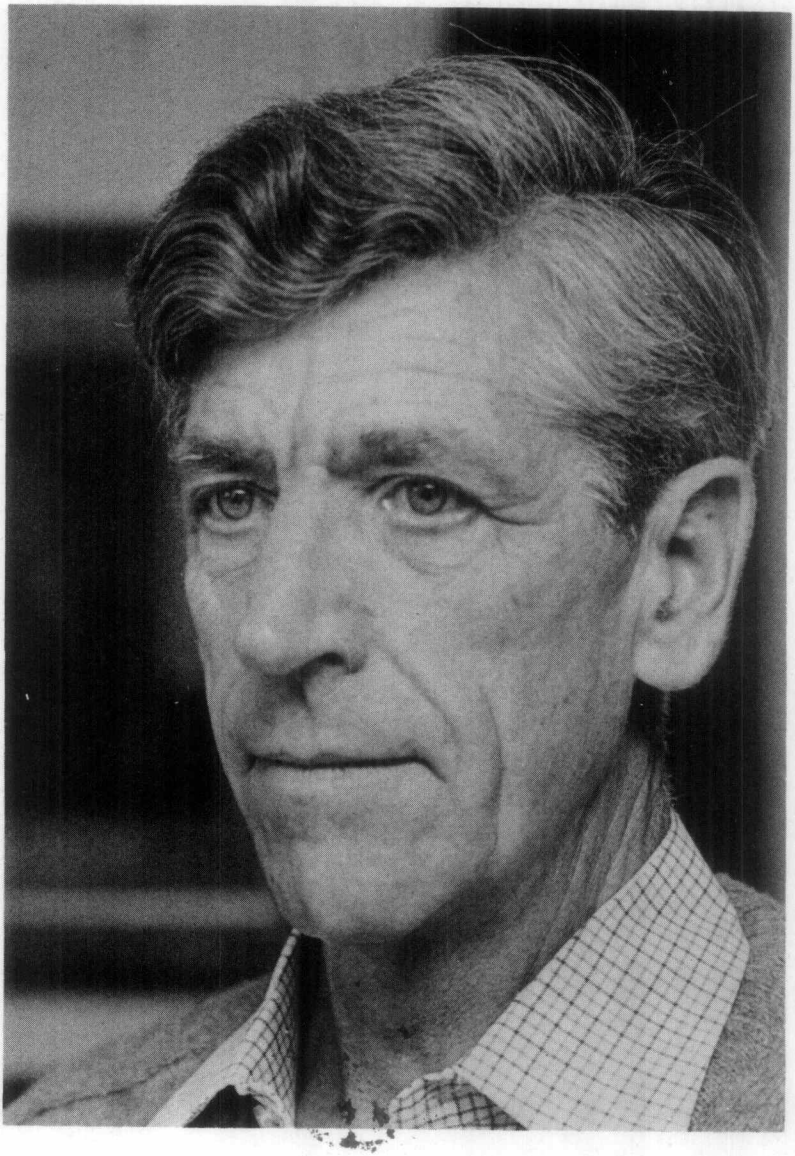

George Whalley (by courtesy of William O'Neill, *Whig-Standard*, Kingston, Ontario, 1980)

For
Elizabeth Whalley and family

It's certain there are trout somewhere
And maybe I shall take a trout
If but I do not seem to care.

W. B. Yeats, 'The Three Beggars'

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JOHN FERNS, McMaster University

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Introduction

> 'I hate everything that merely instructs me without increasing or directly quickening my activity.' These words of Goethe, like a sincere *ceterum censeo*, may well stand at the head of my thoughts . . . .
>
> (Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*)

> (And talking is always a *commitment* to a world.)
>
> (Ian Robinson, *The Survival of English*)

> The danger of this darkness is easily belittled by our impoverished use of the word 'thought'. This word is generally used as if it meant an activity necessary to scientists when they come up against a difficulty in their research, or some vague unease beyond calculation when we worry about our existence. Thought is steadfast attention to the whole. The darkness is fearful, because what is at stake is whether anything is good.
>
> (George Grant, *English-Speaking Justice*)

I first stumbled upon George Whalley's 'The Mariner and the Albatross' more than twenty years ago. It certainly didn't resemble a Brooks and Warren exercise in close textual analysis, and I doubt whether I could have said then why I found it memorable. Those graduate schooldays were too much taken up with an instinctive recoil from the 'perverse, ingenious, desolate' (p.43) gospel of Northrop Frye that held sway at the University of Western Ontario. There was no one to direct me to Professor Whalley's wonderfully just and prophetic review of *The Anatomy of Criticism*, from which I borrow this judgement. Many years later, when I finally came to teach my first course in the history of literary criticism, I knew just enough to seek out his 'On Translating Aristotle's *Poetics*'. It served me well as goad and guide to a fresh understanding of long familiar

passages I mistakenly assumed to be within my grasp. The critical rationale for this book is simply this: if these, the first three essays in the volume, have helped me find my way, then they and the balance of the selection, may do the same for a generation of students and teachers who, whether they realise it or not, desperately need an alternative to structuralism, semiotics and deconstruction. 'The urge to conform can', as Whalley warns, 'become almost compulsive if we get nervous and are afraid that we might miss a trend or a new vogue and be thought old-fashioned . . .' (p.131). For those of us who have enjoyed the privilege of teaching English in the University for a decade or more, and who now face, not without the occasional twinges of anxiety, the responsibility of another twenty years of service, there is the exhilarating example of what George Whalley achieved in the last decade before his retirement. All but the Coleridge and Frye pieces belong to that period of his life.

I

Whalley's suggestion that we adopt the same view of the *Poetics* as 'the early commentators', that it is 'acroamatic' – something to be listened to' (p.55) – recommends itself to us as the wisest way of attending to his own words. The great majority of these papers were in fact composed to be spoken aloud. The superficial signs of the lecturer's presence are readily observable: the declared pause for a sip or a nip; the reliance on certain quotations – touchstones almost – from Coleridge, Yeats or Valéry; the catalogues of student gaffes; or the aphoristic shorthand of 'news, reviews, and interviews' to characterise contemporary pop culture. These mental ticks we could have pruned out, but they are not in any event what we have in mind. We can best make that clear by urging the reader to follow the process of getting to know Whalley traced out for us in the Aristotle essay:

> For I hold the view that a piece of vigorous thinking is an activity of imagination, with its own peculiar spring and set, an action of discovery; and that its form, though overtly discursive, is yet imaginative. If so, the outcome could be expected to be not a group of 'conclusions' or doctrinal precepts, but rather the record of a feat of inventive thinking and the starting-point for fertile, elucidatory, finely controlled and

energetic reflection in response to it.

I should like a translation of the *Poetics* to disclose the *drama* of the discourse – the gesturing forth of the argument (for, as Aristotle notes in passing, *drama* means doing, acting) – so that the reader may be able to 'experience' or enter into the drama. (p.50)

The promised translation would have sought 'to catch the sound of a voice that is good to overhear, bespeaking the grave unhurried self-possession of a man who is confident that he can think aloud coherently and inventively' (p.55).

Whalley set about the task of bringing us into direct contact with Aristotle's 'presence' – that is, 'Aristotle thinking – Aristotle making this thing' (p.50) because he assumed, and we think rightly, that

> behind every utterance there is a person. It is not simply the *words* that mean; it is a *person* who means; and what the person *means*, intends to convey or declare or conceal and for what reason, is physically imprinted into the structure and texture of his language. . . . The 'imprint' of intention is not seldom at variance with the content of the words; to the perceptive ear an utterance becomes not only a declaration *by* the writer but also a disclosure *of* the writer.
>
> Every successful utterance is a reconciliation between the needs of the speaker and the demands of language. Language is no mere instrument; and, if an instrument at all, the instrument plays on the musician as much as the musician plays on the instrument. (p.82)

This same purpose and way of knowing informs all of Whalley's writing. For instance, at an early stage in the case he makes for recognising Jane Austen as a poet, he reveals this surprising relationship between Yeats's poetic idiom and Austen's artful composing:

> Yeats's tone-deafness steered him away from the contemporary cult of trying to write 'musical' verse, and brought him to an unmatched sense of the integrity of language – significant words rhythmically disposed, passionate hieratic utterance keyed to the inventive rhythms of the speaking voice. In the

> same way, Jane Austen's incapacity for composing strong or eloquent verse seems to have endowed her with an incorruptible sense of the integrity of prose, the translucent rhythms of the speaking voice in the other harmony, the peculiar signature of breath and intelligence that identifies a person speaking and the state of mind that from moment to moment informs the voice. (p.147)

Whether it be the criticism of Aristotle, the verse of E. J. Pratt, or the prose fiction of Jane Austen, the manner and quality of Whalley's inquiring remain constant. The identical impulse and recognition also inform those marvellously integrated works of documentary fact and imaginative re-creation, *The Legend of John Hornby* and *Death in the Barren Ground*. Note the similarity between the passages we have just quoted and Professor Whalley's way of discovering their origins:

> Ever since the diary was published more than 40 years ago, the imprint of that voice has proved indelible to anybody who has listened to it . . . the voice that tells of the living that went before the dying: a voice uttered in a firm round hand, the spelling insecure, the punctuation uncertain; the voice of a not-very-accomplished school boy, yet steady, generous in its admiration and in its sense of wonder for the man who had brought him to this, eloquent in its silences, confident in life right to the end. (Introduction to *Death in the Barren Ground*, pp. 19–20)

The critic, the poet and the novelist alike speak the one language if only we listen aright. What else did Wordsworth mean by the oft-quoted but rarely understood question and answer, 'What is a poet . . .?' – 'He is a man speaking to men.' The words for such making and doing and knowing are active verbs such as wondering and admiring. The first principle of such speaking-out or disclosure in writing lies in Whalley's rooted conviction that the gift of utterance is the distinctive mark of man.

II

'Language in itself does not mean, but persons can' (p.40). Keeping this aphorism in mind we can move to the 'knot or nucleus', as Whalley calls it, of his undertaking, the belief

> that the heart of any genuinely educative activity is to be found in language; not language as a phenomenon, nor as an object of inquiry; not language considered merely for what it says or 'means' or contains, nor even literature as examples of the use of language and ways of living; but everything that is engaged by language and in language – the thinking, the feeling, the activity of mind, the reality of experience that, in the wording of it, can be as solid as an inconsolable grief; the reality that language constantly confronts us with, of *making* as a necessary and natural human activity; language as an inventive mode of inquiry that can disclose ourselves to ourselves, discovering to us what we wanted to say; above all language that allows us to make and utter things that are not simply extensions or expressions of ourselves. (p.133)

Or again, this equally eloquent companion passage from the same essay:

> By 'a sense of language' I mean a feeling for the physique, the nerves and muscles of words, and for their textures; a feeling for what language is *doing* almost more than what it is saying or 'meaning', for what it is tracing out, acting out, gesturing forth, embodying; a feeling for the *intrinsic* qualities of words, their origins and transformations, their minute particularities as they establish themselves by context, by location, by rhythm; a feeling for their ability to declare, in precise configuration and ordered hierarchy, multiple meanings, often contrary; a feeling for the inner shaping energy that comes to the ear as shapely rhythm, as a tune often so subtle that it might seem to be on the fringes of silence. To follow this thread – a thread that leads *back* into the mind and into the source of our most inventive endowment – is to move toward the centre of articulation and initiative both in ourselves and in what we are studying. (p.140)

Professor Whalley's 'telling over . . . as a liturgy of wonder' (p.149) sounds 'a call to remembering and to loving and to thinking' (George Grant, *Time as History*, p.49). It is also his way of 'naming' the reality we have traditionally embodied in the words 'poetry' and 'the imagination':

> I take it that imagination is not a 'faculty', but rather an integrated and potent state of the self – a *realising* condition, in which the self and the world are made real. I take it, correspondingly, that the word 'poetry' refers basically to a state of language, a condition qualitatively discernible but not analytically definable – or not yet; a state of language that is noticeably lucid, vivid, nervous, inventive, economical, often translucent, capable of swift movement. Incorrigibly a matter of words (and not dominantly of musical sounds), poetry is informed – or declares itself – by the inventive rhythms of a mind unfolding what cannot be known except in the uttering of it. The rhythms and tone are the indelible marks of energy and of the quality of impulse. (p.148)

George Whalley's delight in the life of language extended to Latin and to Greek. Some of his finest insights originate in his harbouring in the mind the wordings of Aristotle. The Greek dialect Aristotle thought in, Whalley tells us, was

> extremely rich in participles, which with a fully inflected definite article offer a wide range of substantival adjectives which function like verbal nouns, preserving the active initiative of the verbs that are radical to them. This alone goes far to account for the vivid directness typical of Greek philosophical writing – the general absence of special terms and a happy restraint from abstraction. Furthermore, Greek is capable of providing a wide range of cognate words on a single root: this allows for great variety of self-expository compounds, and also adds to the range of participial nouns which by altering their terminations can refer the root to a person, a thing, a product, a process, an intention even. (p.53)

The transmogrification of *poiēsis* and *mimēsis* into English via Latin Whalley demonstrates conclusively as the source of the modern misconceptions about Aristotle's central ideas:

> It is in words of active or indicative termination that English seems to me particularly weak for the business of translating the *Poetics* – words that *by their form* clearly imply process or continuous action. English has no words to match the processive implications that abide in the very form of the words *mimēsis*

> and *poiēsis*. Too often we have to fall back on nouns formed from Latin past participles ('imitation', 'conception', 'notion', 'construction') or upon collective nouns ('poetry', for example, which has to serve far too many uses); and the present participle 'being' hovers uneasily between noun and participle (it took a Coleridge to wonder whether 'thing' could be the present participle of 'the'). Where Greek is strong, lucid, flexible and precise, and English too often, *faute de mieux*, driven to Latinism, a translator of the *Poetics* has to be crafty and unconventional, and write sentences that to an ear attuned to English philosophical writing of the last couple of centuries does not sound like philosophy at all. (p.54)

The Aristotelian sense of shaping, doing, acting, forming pervades each and every one of the passages we have selected for quotation. By locating this *dynamis* so firmly within the workings of language Whalley discovered a means for synthesising the Aristotelian emphasis on action with a Longinian concern for language. That Whalley sought the integrating of these apparently divergent strains in classical criticism is inferable from a passing comment on Frye's presumption to having done so (p.37) in rather different terms, as well as from his way of proceeding in the Austen essay (pp.146–7).

Moreover, through his use of the verb 'to realise' – to know or to recognise, as well as to make real – Whalley found his way to bringing Aristotle's *mimēsis* and the less well known *zōion ti* ('organic and living thing' – p.57) into fertile critical conjunction with Coleridge's thinking on the imagination and on the structural integrity of poetry. That 'Aristotle–Coleridge axis in criticism' (p.73) is further strengthened by the congruity Whalley intuited between Coleridge's sense of the tragic as rendered most feelingly in the narrative action of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and this Aristotelian reading of the tragic:

> tragedy is to do with the darkest and strongest issues in our experience – life and death and law and responsibility and freedom and necessity. He knows that we can betray ourselves from within, that when we take the law into our own hands we pass from freedom to mechanism and cease to be human, having cut ourselves off from the law of our inner nature; and he knows that a man can know that he is doing this and yet

> do it, and watch himself doing it, capable even in his fascination of altering and reversing the action. (p.69)

> In this view, the action of tragedy (to think of only one of the 'kinds' Aristotle has under his eye) is not a 'representation' or 'imitation' at all, but the specific delineation, within extremely fine limits, of a moral action so subtle, powerful and important that it is almost impossible to delineate it; an action self-generated that has as its end a recognition of the nature and destiny of man. (No wonder few 'tragedies' meet the specification.) In this view, mimēsis is simply the continuous dynamic relation between a work of art and whatever stands over against it in the actual moral universe, or could conceivably stand over against it. (p.73)

Whalley learned from Coleridge and from Aristotle that the tragic is not a matter of identifying a literary genre but of living and of recognising the fundamental truths of our natures. The affinities between these two cardinal influences on Whalley's literary criticism is too large a subject to do more than point to in an introduction.

III

For our present purpose it is enough to remind the reader that Professor Whalley's thought grew out of a long tradition. Like T. S. Eliot recovering Arnold's ground or F. R. Leavis taking both Eliot and Arnold as his starting-point for the renewed exploration of the old questions, Whalley requires us to be prepared

> to take long leaps backward in search of some rare and peculiarly illuminating mind. For humanists – preoccupied with the singleness and continuity of human thought – are often vividly aware of the contemporaneity of the past, even of the distant past; their concern is not so much to preserve tradition as to nourish and enrich a continuing life. (p.119)

In this particular formulation Whalley speaks of this discipline as simply 'humane studies', but elsewhere the designation he favours is the less familiar phrase 'heuristic'. The urgent need for