



“We are told that language is a code, and therefore, if we follow its binary logic this clear message will be received and there will be no misunderstanding because the perfect machine does not stutter, stumble or search in desperation for the best word. You will say something and I will understand it. Actually, language, particularly an unfamiliar language, doesn’t work like a well-oiled coding machine. When we struggle with a new language we struggle with our lungs, our tongues, our teeth and our lips. Our hands make shapes in space, we rock backwards and forwards and we become aware that the words we say are part of our body.” (Steve Rushton)

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Art certainly consists of perfection of form. But you imagine that art consists of creating perfect works. You apply the immense and universal aspiration to the creation of form to the production of poems and symphonies, but you have never managed properly to appreciate, or to make others appreciate, the role, and the important role, of form in your own lives. Even in psychology you have not given form the place to which it is entitled. Hitherto we have always considered the feelings, instincts, or ideas which govern our conduct, and regarded form as at the most a harmless, ornamental accessory. When a widow weeps behind her husband’s hearse, we think she does so because she is suffering because of her loss. When an engineer, doctor, or lawyer murders his wife, his children, or a friend, we think that he was driven to it by violent and bloodthirsty instincts. When a politician in a public speech expresses himself stupidly, deceitfully, or pettily, we say he is stupid because he expresses himself stupidly. But the real situation is this: a human being does not externalize himself directly and immediately in conformity with his own nature; he invariably does so by way of some definite form; and that form, style, way of speaking and responding, do not derive solely from him, but are imposed on him from without—and the same man can express himself sometimes wisely, sometimes foolishly, bloodthirstily or angelically, maturely or immaturely, according to the form, the style presented to him by the outside world, the pressure put upon him by other men. And just as worms and insects creep and fly all day long in search of food, so we, without a moment’s respite or relief, perpetually seek form and expression, struggle with other men for style, for our own way of being; and when we travel in a tram, or eat, or enjoy ourselves, or rest, or engage in business, we are perpetually in search of form, and we delight in it, suffer for it or adapt ourselves to it, we break or violate it, or let ourselves be violated by it, amen.

Oh, the power of form! It causes nations to perish, and it leads to wars. It is the reason why things arise among us which do not come from us. Without it you will never succeed in understanding stupidity, or evil, or crime. It governs our smallest reflexes, and lies at the foundation of the whole of our collective life. But for you form and style are ideas restricted to the field of art; and, just as you have reduced the function of art to the production of works of art, so do you debase the idea of style and form; for you, style is only style on paper, the style of your stories. Who, gentlemen, will chastise the posterior that you present to mankind when you kneel before the altar of art? For you form is not something alive,

human, let me say practical and everyday, but a gaudy attribute of art. Bent over your paper, you even forget your own self—and what matters to you is not perfecting yourself in your own personal and concrete style, but perfecting some sort of abstract and imaginary story. Instead of making art your servant, you make yourselves its slave and that, I imagine, is why in sheep-like fashion you allow it to hamper your development and cast you into perpetual sloth.

See how different would be the attitude of a man who, instead of saturating himself with the phraseology of a million conceptualist metaphysician-aestheticians, looked at the world with new eyes and allowed himself to feel the enormous influence which form has on human life. If he still wanted to use his fountain-pen, he would do so, not in order to become a great writer and create art, but, let us say, the better to express his own personality and draw a clear picture of himself in the eyes of others; or to organize himself, bring order within himself, and by confession to cure any complexes or immaturities; and also, perhaps, to make his contact with others deeper, more intimate, more creative, more sharply outlined, which could be of great benefit to his mind and his development; or, for instance, he might try to combat customs, prejudices, principles which he found contrary to his nature; or again, he might write simply to earn a living. He certainly would not spare effort to ensure that his work possessed an artistically attractive form, but his principal goal would be, not art, but himself. He would no longer write pretentiously, to educate, to elevate, to guide, to moralize, and to edify his fellow-men; his aim would be his own elevation and his own progress; and he would write, not because he was mature and had found his form, but because he was still immature and in his efforts to attain form was humiliating himself; making a fool of himself; and sweating like a climber still struggling towards the mountain-top, being a man still on the way to self fulfilment. And if he should happen to write a worthless or silly book, he would say to himself: Well, I have written some rubbish, but I have signed no contract with anyone to write a clever or perfect book. I expressed my stupidity, and I am glad of it, for I am formed and fashioned by the severity of the human judgements which I have called down on my head, and it is as if I were being reborn. You see, then, that an artist equipped with this healthy philosophy is so well rooted in himself that neither stupidity nor immaturity can frighten or harm him; he can externalize himself and hold his head high, in spite of his indolence, while you can externalize nothing, for fear makes you voiceless.

That by itself would be a great alleviation. But, in addition, only a poet who approached things in this fashion would be capable of understanding the issue which has hitherto been your supreme stumbling-block—perhaps the most fundamental, the most intimidating issue of all. Let me state it in imaginary form. Let us imagine an adult, mature poet bent over his paper at grips with his work—and looking over his shoulder an adolescent—a semi-cultivated, semi-educated individual—an average girl perhaps, or any other mediocre and obscure young person—and this person, this adolescent, this girl, this semi-educated or other obscure product of sub-culture, seizes hold of

his mind with a pair of forceps, attacks his soul, clasps and hugs it, refreshes and rejuvenates it, makes it green again, adjusts it to his or her own fashion and reduces it to his or her own level, yes, holding it tenderly in her arms. But the creative artist, instead of facing the intruder, pretends to take no notice, and foolishly imagines that he can avoid the violation by pretending not to have been violated. Is it not that which happens to all of you, from the great genius to the choice little poet of the back row of the chorus? Is it not true that every mature, superior, major and perfected human being depends in a thousand different ways on human beings who are at a less advanced stage of development? And does that dependence not attack the mind right to its very essence? It does so in such a way that we can say that the senior is always the creation of the junior. Do we not, when we write, have to adapt ourselves to the reader? When we speak do we not submit ourselves to the mind of the person to whom our words are addressed? Are we not fatally in love with youth? Are we not constantly forced to seek the favours of inferior persons, to adapt ourselves to them, to bend our necks, bow either to their power or to their spell? And is not this painful violation of ourselves carried out by semi-obscure individuals the most penetrating and most fertile of them all? Now, all that you have hitherto been able to do is to bury your heads in the sand in order not to see the violation; in your concentration on the polishing of your boring verses you have had neither the time nor the inclination to take any interest in it. You act as if nothing had happened, while in reality you have been violated without respite or remission. Oh, why do you enjoy yourselves only among yourselves? Why is your maturity so mature that it can cohabit only with maturity?

But, if you were less preoccupied with art and more with yourselves, you would not keep silent in face of this terrible violation of yourselves; and the poet, instead of writing for other poets, would feel himself penetrated and fertilized from below, by forces which he had hitherto neglected. He would recognize that the only way of freeing himself from the pressure was to recognize it; and in his style, his attitude, his tone, his form—that of his art as well as of his everyday life—he would set himself to displaying this link with a lower level. He would no longer think of himself only as father, but as simultaneously father and son, and he would no longer write as a clever, subtle, and mature man, but as a clever man always reduced to stupidity, as a subtle man reduced to crudity, an adult perpetually reduced to childhood. And if, on leaving his study, he chanced on a child, an adolescent, a girl, or a semi-cultivated person, he would cease to find him or her boring, and no longer pat these people protectively, didactically, and pedagogically on the back while talking down to them in a superior manner; on the contrary, in a holy fit of trembling he would start groaning and roaring, and would perhaps even fall on his knees before them. Instead of shunning immaturity and shutting himself off in what are called coteries, he would realize that a truly universal style is a style born slowly and gradually in contact with human beings of different social conditions, age, education, and stages of development. And that would ultimately lead you to a form of creation so palpitating with life and so full of tremendous poetry that you would all be transformed into sublime geniuses.

So you see what perspectives and what hopes would be opened up to you by these purely personal ideas of mine. But, if you want them to be one hundred per cent creative and categorical, there is still one more step that you must take, and this is such a bold and tremendous step, and its possibilities are so unlimited and its consequences so devastating that it is only softly and from afar that my lips shall mention it. Well, then, this is it. The time has come, the hour has struck on the clock of ages. *Try to set yourself against form, try to shake free of it.* Cease to identify yourself with that which defines you. Try to escape from all expression of yourself. Mistrust your opinions. Mistrust your beliefs, and defend yourself against your feelings. Withdraw from what you seem to be from outside, and flee from all externalization just as the bird flees from the snake.

For—but frankly I do not know whether the time has yet come to tell you this—it is a false assumption that man should be definite, that is to say, unshakeable in his ideas, categorical in his statements, clear in his ideologies, rigid in his tastes, responsible in his speech and actions, crystallized and precise in his way of being. Examine more closely the chimerical nature of the assumption. Our element is eternal immaturity. The things that we think, feel, and say today will necessarily seem foolish to our grandchildren; so it would surely be better to forestall this now, and treat them as if they were foolish already; moreover, the force that impels you to premature finality is not, as you believe, an entirely human force. We shall soon realize that henceforward the most important thing is not to die for ideas, styles, theories, or even to attach oneself to and buttress oneself with them; but to take a step backwards and withdraw in the face of all the things that keep on happening inside us.

Let the cry be backwards! I foresee (though I do not know if the time has yet come to admit it) that the general retreat will soon be sounded. The son of man will realize that he is not expressing himself in harmony with his true nature, but in an artificial manner painfully inflicted on him from outside, either by other men or by circumstances. He will then begin to fear this form that is his own, and to be as ashamed of it as he was previously proud of it and sought stability in it. We shall soon begin to be afraid of ourselves and our personalities, because we shall discover that they do not completely belong to us. And instead of bellowing and shouting: I believe this, I feel that, I am this, I stand for that, we shall say more humbly: In me there is a belief, a feeling, a thought, I am the vehicle for such-and-such an action, production, or whatever it may be. ... The poet will repudiate his song, the commander will tremble at his own orders, the priest will fear his altar, mothers will no longer be satisfied with teaching their children principles, but will also teach them how to evade them, to prevent them from being stifled by them. And, above all, human beings will one day meet other human beings face to face.

from *Ferdydurke* by Witold Gombrowicz, Penguin 1986

Will Holder operates the Whitney Museum elevator, for the publick good, on Saturday March 15th, 2008