

MODERN POETRY AND THE
PURSUIT OF SENSE

I

When Dante climbed on the devil's flank from the hell-center of earth he was puzzled and disturbed. He could not understand, since he had never changed direction, how he was going up now where he went down before. We have lived through a similar experience. In the old world of rational absolutes one could move indefinitely in the right direction. That was the nature of progress. But in our interwoven and tensile fields we escape one vortex only by slipping into another, and the right when followed leads always more or less to the wrong. It is like running a beast around a tree—there is the critical moment at which the pursuer becomes the pursued.

Historical progression seems always to have overshot itself, and it is difficult to say where reaction against advance ends and the counter-action of wisdom begins. Pascal turned his back on scientific enlightenment when it was scarcely under way. Was this the traditional closure to the coming good, or prophetic fear of the confusion to which that good might lead? Was it backward or forward vision, or a blending of the two in one? When Adams and the early American conservatives resisted democratic

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reforms, was that an inertial timidity before the great experiment, or a sober insight into the dangers of mass leveling? And if their doubt, which had roots through the eighteenth century and Hobbes back into the Middle Ages, had much of the staid and retrogressive, why is our disillusion thought to have less? Again, why did the reactionary opponents of socialism at the time of the First World War seem so narrowly bigoted, while today far-sighted idealists sadly admit that free capital and liberalism were more subtly connected than they knew? It seems the wisdom of one time shades into the folly of another; the blindness of yesterday becomes the experience of tomorrow. It is no denial of a great past to raise the standard of advance against it.

All this is peculiarly the case with the modern arts, because they most of all are freely and symptomatically expressive. The reversal we observe there is typical of the whole turning of liberalism upon itself, of that unaccountable retreat in the midst of advance, which has troubled every phase of life.

The way in which painting, music and poetry have moved from the traditional ground of reason and emotion into the subjectively private, the symbolically abstract, the indefinably fragmented, is well known. To attribute this to the usual strangeness of a new art is absurd. Modernism is not new. Its greatest exemplars are either dead or men of advanced age. Their most daring work was done almost a half century ago. There has been plenty of time to get used to it, and plenty of cultivation by all the sophisticates of museums and schools; but in its haunting power it remains as remote and challenging as ever. Indeed, that is the source of its special drive. Schönberg, Picasso, Joyce, Rilke, may never get any easier; for their difficulties are indigenous. *Finnegans Wake* will stand as a landmark of ultimate exploration, of the intellectual refinement which attains at one time the limit of sophistication and complete impenetrability. It is a type of the liberal suicide, a book that is great in the exact measure that it can never be read. But under these conditions how is it great? The paradox has been forced upon us. We are passing through the dead center of a reversing field.

Everywhere, with all the arts as with political life and education, we hear it spoken that a change must be made. When the limits of freedom have been exploded, as of class leveling, one must move the other way; and when avant-garde painting or literature has done everything extreme that can be done, when the subconscious has been hounded down every Freudian alley, the abstract reduced to the black square on the white

ground or to the isolated and fragmented word, there comes a point when further advance is retrogression; there is no more discipline to break, no new surprise worth exploiting; what was daring and advanced against the academy becomes academic and petty in its turn, more alarmingly so as it cannot be distinguished from charlatanism and fad.

The nineteenth century resistance to modernism was mostly of traditional and shocked bourgeois. We have lived through much since then, and the statement now that the arts should return to the common ground of rational and emotional communication is not necessarily reactionary. We hear it, in fact, from the most advanced minds.

It may, however, be quite impractical, for to advocate and achieve are different things. The direction seems good, but unfortunately all efforts to restore the arts to sanity have gone more or less bad. Does this spring from the hopelessness of the task or merely from the confusion of program?

Confusion there has obviously been, but that may be inescapable. The kind of sensible wholeness which, one way or another, great art requires, has been identified with what makes easy sense to the common man. We have been told of the popular nature of Medieval art. The cathedrals have been mentioned in this connection with the public procession for Duccio's *Maesta*. This is partly wishful thinking. The fact is, Medieval art, like Medieval literature, was in the hands of a highly cultivated minority, and though it obviously interpenetrated the folk and the folk it, it was not actually in their hands. Perhaps great art has never been creatively shared by more than a few. That was the case in Dante's day, it was the case in Pound's. Yet under this apparent invariance lies an actual and devastating change. There has been a conscious cleavage of the intellectual, withdrawing from tradition and responsibility into cult and mode, and of the now literate masses, descending from folk life (the germ of all creation) to papers and comics and pulp. And this has been made the more painful by our democratic awareness of it, our guilty romantic conscience that art should elevate and be accessible to all.

Some break from responsibility altogether; others try to sustain an impossible standard. It is not surprising if the cry for wholeness and sanity has merged with that for the most blatant popular effects. This has gone to the greatest extremes in the governments of mass dictatorship, in Russia most of all. New Deal art was a gentle sally in the same direction and showed, like American advertising, that accessibility may have nothing at all to do with genuine art.

If we look at American literature we find the same confusion, the same

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merging of motions of sanity and democratic appeal, and here as elsewhere we discover that almost everything of this kind is aesthetically suspect. Frost is the obvious exception. He saves himself by holding to a local tradition in which the private problem may still be treated with sincerity and charm. As such he remains peripheral. The average modern cannot share his heritage or his desire. Sandburg, who has tried to break into universal dimension, has been positive at the risk of turning anyone's—not only aesthetic but intellectual—stomach. Robinson also made a great effort, but could never get his man against the sky, being essentially a negative spirit determined on a positive act. Even Hart Crane had such desires and pursued disordered affirmation off his symbolic bridge.

The mere mention of Hart Crane reminds us that it is not only the forlorn attempt to appeal to the people which has undermined the poetry of wholeness. Something far deeper stands in the way. The very efforts to affirm have been subtly transformed into denial—not denial only, but cult, indirection, the hermetical obscure. It is not only that we dislike the banal; we dislike the defined. As Mallarmé said: "To name an object is to do away with three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem." Perhaps that is a sacrifice poetry must come to; yet it is astonishing how far a metrically disciplined concentration of explicit sense disappoints those who assume they desire it. Whether we are held by the fascination of the oblique or "the strange disease of modern life" it hides and reveals, the road we have called essential is somehow aesthetically distasteful. We are repelled by every motion toward that which we ostensibly desire. So Ezra Pound receives the poetry prize for 1948—that historical year in which we are still living, though the calendars have changed.

II

Poetry, like other organic things, is woven in the field of the whole and the part. Arnold, in a letter to Clough of October 28, 1852, regrets that the influence of the Elizabethans should have led Keats, Shelley and others to seek "exuberance of expression, richness of images," without perceiving that "modern poetry can only subsist by its contents," that it must keep language and style "very plain, direct and severe," while it presses "forward to the whole." He means, of course, the rationally explicit whole.

We, a hundred years later, looking back on a modern poetry which has done almost the opposite, subsisting less and less by entire content and always more by wild richness of imagery, may be inclined to doubt if the

influence of the Elizabethans can be so much to blame. They, like poets of today, were creating in tension which is always present, like the conflict of the free individual and the ordered society, its prototype, to which it bears historical relation. But the beauty of a free society on its road to ruin, even Plato, who despised the phenomenon, was ironically forced to allow: "Such, my friend, I said, is the fair and glorious beginning out of which springs tyranny" (*Republic VIII*). And there is a similar beauty, so "fair and spangled," a haunting richness and magic about the uninhibited word. Images, like the decoration Ruskin writes of, can be servile or free. The images of Arnold, for example, stand in a kind of servitude to his rational communication, the sense of the whole:

He too upon a wintry clime
Had fallen—on this iron time
Of doubts, disputes, distraction, fears. . . .

(From "Memorial Verses" on the death of Wordsworth, 1850)

But these lines of Yeats:

Your hooves have stamped at the black margin of the wood,
Even where horrible green parrots call and swing.
My works are all stamped down into the sultry mud.—

or these of Eliot:

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.—

though in other things quite unlike, have this clearly in common—the magic of the unservile image.¹

Modern poetry has put this temptation strongly before us; and our aesthetic sense, like Plato's democratic man, once it has got the racy flavor of irresponsible beauty, is unwilling to give it over. So poetry like the state continues until "all things are just ready to burst with liberty."

For us, moreover, the irrational has a peculiar seduction. We have lived through an era of inspired disruption, and the radiance we have shed, like that of a nova or exploding star, was the product of wild release and

1. David Daiches' interpretation of the passage from Eliot (see *Poetry and the Modern World*) that the sea is a symbol of creation and destruction, the waves of life-rhythm, etc., as it is pure projection, does not make the images any less rebel to reason. It gives evidence rather for what follows, that the mind will always seek meaning, even to the point of pretending it is found.

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exploitation, the dissolution within and without of the stern old checks and traditional frames. Visual art too, which used to submit constructive imagination to the severity of a representational canon founded on the sense of validity and meaning in the world, equally cast off submission, enjoying in the splurge of every resource one of its most brilliant periods, until it finds itself at present distracted, reluctant to go back, yet unable to press forward without committing artistic suicide.

In this crisis, the question where shall the arts go is the same as a greater one, where shall the democratic individual and society go, and that of a greater still, where shall the liberated spirit go? No wonder that in revolutionary situations art has become an aspect of politics.

A year or so ago Kenneth Burke gave a lecture in Chicago called "Poems or Bombs," in which, extending the nineteenth century thesis of the need for a great poetry to save the race, he outlined the fundamental requirements for an epic of the future—it must glorify human values in the historical mode of western culture, must be rationally and emotionally satisfying—but one can imagine the rest. Having labored with no ultimate success at such a project off and on for several years, I was of course interested, and spoke to Mr. Burke afterwards, only to find that he had no notion what such a poem would really be, could not envisage it, had in reality no hope of its coming. We talked of modern poets and he mentioned with special praise Theodore Roethke. It was in fact at the same time that a group of poems by this "vegetal radicalist" appeared in the *Sewanee Review*, introduced by Mr. Burke with a long and serious essay. For purposes of illustration we may quote almost at random:

"And in the lines immediately following ('When I took off my clothes/ To find a nose,/ There was only one/ For the waltz of To,/ The pinch of Where'), besides 'to' in the sense of 'toward,' there are suggestions of 'two' (here present in its denial, but the meaning most prominent to an auditor who does not have the page before him), while there are also connotations of 'toe' as in toe dance (which in turn stirs up a belfry of bat-thoughts when we consider the narcissistic nature of this particular 'toe dance,' recall similarly the 'last waltz with an old itch' in 'The Long Alley,' and then flutter vaguely in the direction of the infantile 'polymorphous perverse' as we think of the briskly and brilliantly conveyed corybantic in the brief lyric, 'My Papa's Waltz,' the account of a child snatched up and whirled riotously in a dance by his tipsy father). And since 't' is but an unvoiced 'd,' we believe that on the purely tonal level, 'God' may be heard in 'gate.' " etc.

The problem of veiling masturbation in poetry and of criticizing such pas-

sages with the elevation they require is no doubt an interesting one, but it is quite the antithesis of finding a poetry of integrated power.

As for Roethke himself, a few lines will sufficiently illustrate the point:

Sit and play
Under the rocker
Until the cows
All have puppies. . . .
My father is a fish.

This last line might mean many things. "Fish" is a wonderful word for the critics. The Freudian and sexual significance could be developed at length. Or it might be interpreted as an evolutionary symbol, the organic stages of spirit; or religiously. There might be a literary allusion to Faulkner "My mother is a fish," or even by chance association to Nietzsche: "Silbern, leicht, ein Fisch schwimmt nun mein Nachen hinaus. . . ." It might in fact mean a variety of things, but as it stands it means nothing. It is like Malevitch's black square into which he read infinite significance:

"Suprematism compresses all of painting into a black square on a white canvas. I did not have to invent anything. It was the absolute night I felt in me; in that, I perceived the creation, and I called it suprematism. It expresses itself in the black plane in the form of a square."

But it is not our intention to criticize Roethke's poem, or even Mr. Burke's more pretentious prose. It is enough here to observe how a critic openly advocating a poetry of reason and message is actually drawn toward the last extension of fragmentation and disease.

It is not without cause that talent is still diverted down the exhausted beds of post-symbolist veiling and associative magic, or that Mr. Burke, even while speaking of "Poems or Bombs," manures the intellectual soil in which bombs best root and grow. The democracies too, even while realizing that what the world chiefly needs is responsible vision and reasoned control, continue their undisciplined splurge toward suicide. And it is the way of evolution that when an order has expanded and spent itself, the genes that have known adaptive radiation do not return to unity and strength; the branching of the future must begin as lower stages on the evolutionary stem. Poetry cannot return effectively to direct and positive statement until it has something profound and sensible to say. Is that to be found in western society? The creation of a responsible art, as of a responsible freedom, depends on one thing: the regeneration of an innately

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humanistic philosophy, of a belief in man and the organizing universe, a relation of human values to eternal values.

III

We are always trying, rightly or wrongly, to read rational sense into things, even into modern poetry. This is no quirk of the human mind, but its organizing essence as mind.

Leonardo tells of seeing pictures, forming them from the random mottlings of a wall; and the critic does the same, often with no less refractory materials, when he interprets subconscious doodlings the poet himself refuses to clarify. Even the last cultivator of the meaningless, the most arcane exponent of the fad, still dives for sense and comes to the surface with some rare mystery he pretends to understand.

Certainly the important poets, even of the modern indirection, leave an impression of the deepest content, not only of imagery and feeling, but of a concealed sense as well. Their pupils and lackeys tell us "a poem should not mean but be," yet in saying so, it is clear they *mean*. The masters too work under the same contradiction. They refuse to explain their poetry, that would rob it of magic; at the same time they are possessed of the prophetic urge. Like Cassandra they are burning to tell all, to grapple with past and future, mysteries and death, to enter action and change the unchangeable; yet such a spell of secrecy is laid upon them that whatever might advance the explicit clarification required by reason, feeling repudiates and the aesthetic sensitivity avoids.

Rilke wrote to his sister (a manuscript letter, see the article by Dr. Ernst Zinn in *Antike und Abendland*, III, p. 249, footnote): "Das Sonett" (number sixteen, that is, of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which had perplexed critics and been explained, in keeping with the prophetic character of Rilke, in various symbolic ways) "muss man wissen—oder erraten—, rechnet sich an einen Hund; ich mocht's nicht anmerken. . . ." The sonnet, that is, is addressed to a dog. This, he tells her, one must know in order to understand the poem, or must infer. Yet he did not wish to point it out, since that—he goes on to say—would have spoiled the mystery. Here is the typical contradiction of wishing at once to hide and reveal. Since the romantic movement when the new universe and order had first to be shaped, we may observe the heightening of this singular paradox: that the men who have labored under the greatest urgency or prophetic calling have been the most driven into the incommunicable obscure,

until in our time enigma has become the cant watchword for the profound.

It can be objected that some sort of poetry of enigma has existed before. Indeed, if we examine the tendency to the obscure in western literature, we will find three principal waves where it appears, one the modern, the other two in a sense anticipating it, though actually different in nature. All these come at critical periods of spiritual reformation and stress. In these periods we find apparent precursings of modernism not only in poetry, but in painting, where the representational canons are twisted or torn, and in music, where tonality, melody and balanced form tend to dissolve or be transcended.

The two peaks of tension are the Late Renaissance and the Revolutionary-Romantic, centering around 1600 and 1800. The phenomenon is of course partial, but in the first period is illustrated in art by the sequence from Michelangelo's last Pietà (the Rondanini, 1555-64) through late Tintoretto to El Greco; and in lesser northern mannerists, as Jacob de Gheyn II, a similar tendency appears, where spatial forms are distorted into patterns of stress. In music there is the daring expansion of chromaticism, which leads from Vicentino and De Rore, through Giovanni Gabrieli to the twelve-tone summit of Gesualdo, and over the North with Sweelinck, Weelkes, Hassler and others. Poetry at the same time seems most to break the rational frames in Italy with Michelangelo and Campanella, and in England rises through the School of Night experimentation ("What Geomantike iaw howles in mine eares,/ The ecchoized sounds of horrorie?") toward the violence of early Donne and the strange transcendence of *Lear*, where the highest truth can take form only in the formless, the mad. As for the Revolutionary rupture, it is represented in painting especially by Füssli, Blake and late Goya, and in music by the "dissonant" and dynamic that runs from Storm and Stress Mozart to the late works of Beethoven, culminating in the *Grosse Fugge*. In literature Blake again claims attention, and in Germany late Goethe and more especially Hölderlin, in whom message becomes increasingly cryptic as it grows more profound. As for the genuine modern break, it does not come until the late nineteenth century, with Hopkins in England, the Symbolists in France, and with their well-known contemporaries in music and art.

Obviously this is over-simplification. One can say that anticipations of modernism appear elsewhere in Western Culture, particularly in the Middle Ages, where contemporary art finds fascinating affinities, and contemporary music as well—as a comparison of later Stravinsky or Hin-

demith with fourteenth century *Ars Nova* will reveal. But that was before the rational canons of Western communication were formed. All medieval abstract and obscure, as with Dante, who is rich in it, exist in the limits of the inherited synthesis of trans-rational faith (by which it is defined), and employs the pre-rational and pre-humanist techniques of Gothic style. It affords, with Thomistic philosophy, an aesthetically secure region for the disillusioned flight, an escape in our day from the dangers of Promethean and transcendental continuance. But precisely in its offer of technical avenues, it evades the real inner problem of the modern challenge and the modern mind. Even Pound, who is scarcely a transcendentalist, has said "Aquinas' map not valid now" (*Letters*, p. 323).

Other tendencies to modernism can also be found, as in the seventeenth century, though in a rationally formulated medium; and surely one can trace a series of links through Nietzsche, Wagner, Beaudelaire and many more, to join the revolutionary wave to our own—are we not ultimately children of the romantic heart? But this is only the sort of thing that must be expected of general patterns drawn from an organic complex. What is important for us is not the precise number of anticipations of modernism that can be found, but that the modern abstract is essentially different from them all.

The obscurity of Michelangelo and Campanella springs from the compression, often into sonnet form, of the profoundest meaning. But the poems are explicit and whole. Milton is difficult at times for similar reasons and with a comparable quality, though never as ruthless as Campanella. The obscurity of Shakespeare is of a different sort. It actually transcends reason and lives in suspension, but only as a floating phase of a directional whole, relativism shaping tumultuous and inexplicable affirmation. Donne, as Coleridge implied of him ("Wit's forge and fire-blast, meaning's press and screw"), courts tension for its own sake. But his fantastical also builds into the ultimately rational and explicit, just as his disillusion and bitterness are stresses in a vigorously confident frame.

Even the romantic anticipations are essentially affirmative. Affirmation has moved into the inner realm of private symbol and myth, and has absorbed the first burden of disillusion with its loneliness and question. But it remains affirmation, forming as such the revolutionary content of the poem. So with Blake and Hölderlin. Obscurity is forced upon them by the nature of the task and age; they have not yet learned to cultivate it for its suggestive charm. If Goethe appears to do this at times in the second part of *Faust*, it is again a shifting feature of a complexly suspended, but af-

firmative and directional whole. The closest anticipation of modernism is that small fragment from Hölderlin, written near the time of his madness, "Hälfte des Lebens" ("The Half of Life"), which we may translate with liberties:²

Wreathed with yellow pears
And with wild roses, hangs
The land in the sea,
O blessed swans,
And drunk with kisses
You dip your heads
In the holy sobering water.

Where alas shall I catch
At blooms in winter, where
At the light of sun
And earthy shadows?
Speechless and cold
Stand the walls, in the wind
The vanes clatter.

But the imagistic strangeness of this is in part appearance only. Here, as always, is the great theme of Day and Night, Winter and Spring, which runs like a unifying ground through all his poems. It is in this symbolic history that the poet must live, a prophet in darkness of spiritual dawn, and even this small fragment, under the surface, is possessed by the larger theme.

From these precursors the modern is distinct in many ways. Flaubert's famous letter stands before it like an inscribed portal ("Lasciate ogni speranza"):

"I am turning to a kind of aesthetic mysticism. When . . . the exterior world is disgusting, enervating, corruptive, and brutalizing, honest and sensitive people are forced to seek somewhere within themselves a more suitable place to live. . . . The soul, unable to overflow, will be concentrated on itself. We shall see a return of world-sicknesses. . . . Books like the *Satyricon* and the *Golden Ass* will be written once more, containing on the psychical plane all the lush excesses which those books have on the sensual."³

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| 2. Mit gelben Birnen hängen
Und voll mit wilden Rosen
Das Land in den See,
Ihr holden Schwäne,
Und trunken von Küssen
Tunkt ihr das Haupt
Ins heilignüchterne Wasser. | Weh mir, wo nehm ich, wenn
Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo
Den Sonnenschein,
Und Schatten der Erde?
Die Mauern stehn
Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde
Klirren die Fahnen. |
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3. *Correspondence*, 2nd series, Vol. II (Paris, 1907), p. 129.

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Through this portal of disillusion the modern grows to the expressionistic self-wounding or the withdrawal of abstract. Between itself and the romantic pain it erects the scaffold of indeterminate suspension. Its infinite meanings grow toward vacancy: "Paralyzed force, gesture without motion"; they become scarcely meanings at all, haunting intuitions of the meaningful meaninglessness of things, the all-meaning which is void. Of this the first burst was power, the great glimmerings of the pre-war abstract. Rilke carried it as far as anyone. That is what saves his particular aesthetic mysticism from its otherwise pervasive unwholesomeness. But its lingering indirection is the escape of a world which has little direct to say. Thus William Carlos Williams, "Between Walls":

the black wings
of the
hospital where
nothing
will grow lie
cinders
in which shine
the broken
pieces of a green
bottle

Against this precise trailing out of the oblique, Hölderlin stands more as a pattern of what we would wish a future poetry of direction to be, than of what we can accuse the late modern of having been:

But when the One of all dies on whom most
Beauty hung, whose ways wonder bred, fore-marked
Immortal—when heaven (or earth) has drunk him,
And the living lost meet eyes of enigma,
Nor can touch one on the other; when not sand
Only or bent willow negates his presence,
But all sounds of temple and cries of people,
Until no more through the void earth or heaven
Remains one drop of spirit—what is this thing?

The seed-time of the soul, cumbered in darkness,
Dumb to its own life, but the rains shall reach it;
Weary the winters, at the last comes corn.

(Free paraphrase from Hölderlin's *Patmos*)

IV

In English the most important modern poets are of course Yeats and Eliot, so their position in this matter is of some concern. Eliot's is the easier to define. He fulfils perfectly the paradox of the wordless prophet: "The word within a word, unable to speak a word, / Swaddled with darkness." From first to last it is clear he sees the waste and is driven to alter it. But this calling is opposed by the absence of passion, faith and will. The self-balancing and self-doubting mind—"Because I do not hope to turn again"—renders all that impossible: "I am no prophet and here's no great matter." Paradox buttresses on paradox in the refined perfection of withdrawal: "Teach us to care and not to care." It is the fate of all his characters, who are all an image of the self and age. He has only to say: "I would meet you upon this honestly," for you to know that what follows will be evasively obscure. For that is his honesty (which remains admirable), the supreme honesty of hollowness, of the liberal anaemia.

Where Yeats stands with regard to philosophic sense is more difficult to define. In one way he is a summit of the subjectively obscure, working through Celtic and personal symbols of such magic that we are half content to let meaning alone. There is the amusing case of the line from "Among School Children," first printed with *The Tower* in 1928. The passage appeared: "Soldier Aristotle played the taws / Upon the bottom of a king of kings." I knew a young poet at an eastern university who used to repeat that whole stanza, with "golden-thighed Pythagoras" and the rest, and say it was the most hauntingly beautiful thing in the language. He assumed playing the taws was a game of some kind, and had scarcely inquired about the king of kings; but that did not trouble him at all; the motion and imagery excited him so far that sense was left behind. He could not tell me, of course, why Aristotle was called a "soldier" (except that it fitted the "movement"), and in fact no one else could, because the line was supposed to read: "Solider Aristotle," contrasting him with Plato, who had just been mentioned. Now this is pedestrian, and my young poet fought when it appeared that Aristotle could no longer, rationally, be a man of arms. So much for the charm of unservile imagery. But the strange thing is that this error went through about fifteen printings and was never mentioned or corrected until the last edition of Yeats appeared.

Of course this is merely an anecdote; it does not prove too much. But what it pleasantly indicates, any reader of Yeats, either of the poems or of

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the almost unparalleled mystery of *A Vision*, can confirm—that in one sense he is a master of the subjective veil; every communicable meaning cloaks itself under the “little silver trout,” “the dolphin’s mire and blood,” or “those horrible green birds.”

And yet in another sense Yeats remains a speaking prophet, one of the most determinedly philosophical of moderns. The most puzzling symbols often fit into a fairly simple scheme of thought, building the antinomies of a vitally transcended Platonism:

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?

And he tells us himself, though really it is not so simple:

We were the last romantics—chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness.

Certainly no one can be more explicit than Yeats when he aims that way, as in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” where he contrasts the pre-war dreams and ideals with the bestial reality:

And planned to bring the world under a rule,
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

This has the direct impact of passages of great statement from Milton, Dante, and Goethe:

Licence they mean when they cry liberty;
For who loves that must first be wise and good.

Milton, *Sonnet XII*

No other poet of our time has shown this power. Yet we must observe that Yeats achieves it only in passages of criticism or attack, in which our age is still potent. The affirmative generalization—

Nella sua voluntade e nostra pace,
Dante, *Il Paradiso*

or

All is best, though we oft doubt,
What th’ unsearchable dispose
Of highest wisdom brings about
And ever best found in the close;

Milton, *Samson Agonistes*

or

Kein Wesen kann zu nichts zerfallen!
Das Ew'ge regt sich fort in allen,
An Sein erhalte dich beglückt!—

Goethe, *Vermächtnis*

appears a lost art.

But that is by the bye. At any rate, we have as much reason to look for profound meaning in Yeats as in any poet of our time, and as much difficulty to find it. I stress this fairly obvious truism because of what follows.

Now of all Yeats' poems, one of the most certifiably significant is "The Second Coming" from 1921. It is well known. The first eight lines give a concentrated statement of the dissolution of our time, the fall of the West:

. . . Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. . . .
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Here again we have powerful explicit statement also of the negative kind. What follows is more difficult. The poet feels that some revelation is at hand: "Surely the second Coming is at hand." A feature of our many cyclical theories, which have more or less been dubbed Spenglerian though of various origins, is the coming of Revelation or mystical faith in a decaying civilization. In so far as this Coming contributes to the destruction of the old order, the quietly traditional and material way, it is ruthless and cruel. It is, in short, dogma and martyrdom, and is feared by the stagnation which in another part of its being seeks and desires it. The personal history of this is common; it is the history of saints, who must sacrifice to become; and there is the parallel history of an age. The prototype was the savingly destructive coming of Christianity into Rome. The evidence of the duality is the enigma of the Dark Ages, the pitiless divine of *Spiritus Mundi*. The projected return was anticipated in our own period, where a late-cycle material culture seemed on the point of destroying itself. As in the age and decay of the individual body ("An aged man is but a paltry thing . . . unless / Soul clap its hands"), so in history we are forced from the whole chestnut-blossoming of life, into the dire antinomies of spirit and bone.

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In this way I had interpreted the poem, the more confidently as I seemed to find the same idea in Eliot and elsewhere.

It is not without motive that I have summarized the problem here. I had the opportunity of talking with Mr. Eliot recently in Chicago. Knowing he was reluctant to discuss his own poetry, I aimed at the notion of culture cycles, Yeats' "The Second Coming," then as I have just done, through a mention of his own works, asking in effect what he thought of the matter.

Mr. Eliot answered, in his retiringly beautiful way, as if I had made no mention of his own poetry at all. As for "The Second Coming" of Yeats, he said, he had assumed it was a negative work, describing an age of decay and the coming of the Antichrist. Now as I understand it, if the Antichrist has modern significance, it is as a symbol of the violent substitute for religious faith, whether Nazi, Communist, or another. And this almost entirely reverses the meaning of the poem. It is only natural that I should still prefer my own reading, feeling as I do that Yeats has expressed similar ideas often enough—as in "Two Songs from a Play":

The Roman Empire stood appalled:
It dropped the reins of peace and war
When that fierce virgin and her star
Out of the fabulous darkness called—

to make me reasonably sure of the thing. But that T. S. Eliot should take the opposite view came as somewhat of a jar.

In the conversation that ensued, Mr. Eliot, with gentle diffidence, expressed opinions about the unparaphrasable quality of a poem which are not unusual: if the poet had meant what you can say in other words, he would have said it; that the poet is wise not to explain his work, for that is to limit it to what now after the experience he remembers himself as having consciously intended; but in this he assumes false authority. A poem rather, said Eliot, grows and gathers meaning as it is variously read and interpreted.

Now that a poem transcends its rational content in prose is such a commonplace, not only of our generation but of others, that I doubt if anyone would be found to deny it. But if somewhere in poetry the reason must be abandoned for that leap into the unknown, the radiance, the symbolic and associative light, there must still be some kind of a jumping-off place, and the reason plays a part in getting us there. It is well enough for a poem to develop meaning as different people read it, but for it to change utterly

from black to white, from a poem of the physical cruelty of spiritual re-birth, to the horror of physical and anti-spiritual birth, is carrying it rather far. The truth is, a poet cannot have his cake and eat it too. He cannot say a definite thing clearly if at the same time he wants to leave himself open for saying something profound he did not intend but that some admirer may read into him. In the same way, a painter cannot paint a man if he wishes to leave you with the feeling that it may be a horse if you prefer. And that the poet is so unwilling to affix and confirm, even in regard to a central and important matter like "Christ the tiger" ("Gerontion"), shows a certain weakness and tendency to evade the responsibility which, from the prophetic tone of that, as of most of the poet's utterance, it is clear he is driven to assume.

I ventured to suggest as much to Mr. Eliot, and to remind him that Yeats was unfortunately dead; that it might have been better had he cleared up such matters beforehand; that he, Eliot, was still alive. . . .

But the only answer I received was the withdrawing enigma of his smile.

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Now in the death, old age, or imprisonment of most of the leaders of the avant-garde, in the "Little Magazine" trailing out which has already been enough illustrated and can be documented abundantly by every observer, we perceive that the modern abstract has been in general the expression of man reduced from humanity to function or confronted with that reduction, of nature desiccated out of organic interplay to symbolic paradigm. In this analysis and exploration the first and greatest found triumphant calling. The followers pursued where they could not lead, beginning in the void in which they were born. That was more and more the smart place to reside. They also talked of new directions and thought themselves leaders. It was Golaud offering guidance to Melisande: "Venez avec moi. . . ." "Où allez-vous?" she asks. And he: "Je ne sais pas. . . Je suis perdu aussi. . ." It is the paradox of the lost guide. Cassandra mad to reveal and her revelation mad. They abandoned space-time for the "boum" of the Marabar caves. In opposition to this, the new organic reaffirms the meaningful concordances of spirit and matter, of the world and man.

Most of our poets, it is clear, have felt they were living in a lost age, a time of disruption and despair, that life in such a period was fever and disease, that their own fragmentations, fixations, auto-eroticisms, or what else, were somehow expressive—provided they were obscured and subtil-

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ized to the level of the symbolic abstract—of the general fragmentation and neurosis. It is also clear that some older members of the avant-garde look for just this tendency in the younger men they are to favor (not necessarily because they seek disease, but because they require the hectic shimmer of associative skill that seems at present to accompany it); they look, in short, for those who are exploiting the roads of rupture which they themselves have exploited before. So Eliot commends Kenneth Patchen, and some aimlessly complaining verses come out in a printing that flaunts charlatan excess.

But the time of reversal has come. Our age is certainly not the most placid of history; it has its horror; it has also its challenge, its majesty of vision. Every modern endures an adolescence of lamenting the fashionable world-disease. But if he has the adventure of spirit in any way at heart, he soon learns that there has never been such a time for transcendental building and self-contemplation as in this radiant and tumultuous evening of the liberal West.

We have had enough snivelling and retreat and aesthetic elaboration of despair. Is man a beast? Of course. We are habituated to it. That is the field in which spirit labors. Let it labor. Has the Western hope and dream, the flight of freedom, led under mushrooming clouds to its own waste and confusion? The wise knew it long ago. Goethe knew it; Milton knew it; Bruno knew it, and in the image of Icarus welcomed the flame. This too is an element for the life of spirit, antidote to the self-deception that has lain a hundred years upon us. Armageddon has always waited around the corner, whether for the individual or culture, the earth or solar system, or the assumed world of matter crouched before Judgment—what difference? Death is the universal death, spirit the eternal protagonist. The problem is to live in this stress with integrity. Our wars have not altered the situation. The film over the meaningless and void is no thinner than ever, the spectacle of life on that film grander than before. The spiritual malady of our time is mostly of faint heart—a kind of green-sickness in girls.

Against currents of pettiness and obstacles of specialized jealousy, the Western mind gropes through the new sciences and organic history toward the philosophic synthesis its destiny requires. Against the incredible meanness of the pulp-literate masses and modish anaemia of the literary reviews, the Western tongue awakes to the splendor of its singing task, the honest expression of this culminant human adventure. Let those who teach and edit and print know this for their charge, the vision they must encourage.

Not that it will therefore be a popular thing, or will save Western society or depend on that salvation. Had the achievement of Plato hinged on restoring the Greek city state, we would not know the meaning of the shadows on the wall of the cave. Of course in one sense the spirit of a new poetry is also the spirit of renewed freedom, being the wisdom and will to live affirmatively in the highest drama of mind. But the fruit of this spirit may spring in "a garden enclosed," in the private life, not in the public. And it may be difficult of access, as much so as the fashionable obscurities of today. Its complications, however, will be those of responsible profundity, opening to reason, involving the explicit and affirmative core. Such is the fruit that will appear, and its token and sign will be wholeness.