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SENSE AND POETRY

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SENSE AND POETRY

*Essays on the Place of Meaning
in Contemporary Verse*

BY

JOHN SPARROW

"I made [my version] for their sakes
who understand Sense and Poetry . . .
when that Poetry and Sense is put into
words which they understand."

DRYDEN

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TO
RICHARD JENNINGS

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INTRODUCTION

MUCH OF the world's great poetry has been written by those who thought that art is a kind of imitation ; that literature should describe life. That belief was long ago superseded in large measure by the view, most sympathetically explained by Matthew Arnold, that the function of literature was to be not a description, but, in some sense, a criticism, of life. This view is still widely held, but it in its turn has given way to the belief that the business of literature is to provide an escape from life, that art has a realm of its own in which it demands worship for its own sake, and that the function of poetry is to give to its readers a pleasure which they cannot find in their life of every day.

Another view seems to prevail with those poets and critics who are today most influential. This is the view that literature should not describe or criticize life, still less provide an escape from the world, but should somehow epitomize life ; that a piece of writing should be an expression, as exact as possible, of some phase or moment of experience, that it should be the writer's aim to reproduce or to typify "a consciousness." Since this belief has deeply influenced modern writers and has led them to depart from the paths of sense and intelligibility which we pursue in

ordinary converse—a departure which is the subject of the following essays—it will not be out of place to examine it here in some detail.

It is expected of a modern writer that he should express not merely a consciousness, but a modern consciousness ; he must be “ abreast of his age.” “ A poet cannot expect to write well, to give pleasure to his most careful critics, unless he is abreast of his own times, honest with himself, and uses a technique sufficiently flexible to express precisely those subtleties of thought and feeling in which he differs from his predecessors.” ¹

In his *New Bearings in English Poetry* Dr. F. R. Leavis states in similar terms the aims that should inspire the modern poet : “ All that we can fairly ask of the poet is that he shall show himself to have been fully alive in our time. The evidence will be in the very texture of his poetry.” ² A little further on, the poet is recommended “ To invent techniques that shall be adequate to the ways of feeling, or modes of experience, of adult, sensitive moderns.” ³

The poetry of today then, is written by adult sensitive moderns for adult sensitive moderns ; and Dr. Leavis, paying the homage due to one adult sensitive modern from another, gives Mr. T. S. Eliot his highest praise when he says that he has written “ poetry

¹ *New Signatures* (Hogarth Press, 1932), Preface, p. 8.

² *New Bearings*, p. 24.

³ *New Bearings*, p. 25.

that expresses freely a modern sensibility, the ways of feeling, the modes of experience, of one fully alive in his own age.”¹ *The Waste Land* apparently is a supreme achievement of this kind. Mr. Eliot’s note on the significance of Tiresias in that poem (“the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem”), according to Dr. Leavis, “indicates plainly enough what the poem is : an effort to focus an inclusive human consciousness.” The effort is apparently successful for, when he reads this passage, says the Doctor, “A cultivated modern is (or feels himself to be) intimately aware of the experience of the opposite sex.”²

Dr. Leavis, whom we may take as representing “cultivated modernity,” clearly holds a very different view of the aim of a writer from that of critics who think that literature should describe a scene, or tell a story, or that it is the poet’s business to create a world of the imagination, or in some other way to provide an escape from the life of every day.

The poet, on this view, is not a particular kind of artist, and literature is not a specialized field of art. For the writer’s task is to present his material, that is the modern consciousness, exactly as it is. A “literary” treatment of that material is of all things the most to be avoided. So, according to Mr. Ezra Pound, who has attempted in print to teach the

¹ *New Bearings*, p. 76.

² *New Bearings*, p. 95.

student of literature "How to Read," the masterpieces of writing of the past are interesting only in so far as they express exactly the consciousness of an author or his age. Writers who have not made in their means of expression the innovations necessary to this end may be neglected by the student of literature; he speaks therefore with equal scorn "of Hemans . . . or of Collins, Cowper, and Churchill";¹ he says, "I am chucking out Pindar and Virgil, without the slightest compunction,"² and, as if to sum up all, "For the purposes of general education we could omit all study of monistic totemism and Voodoo for at least fifty years and study of Shakespeare for thirty on the ground that acquaintance with these subjects is already very widely diffused, and that one absorbs quite enough of them from boring circumjacent conversation."³

The principles on which such exclusions are justified are indicated in the following passage:

"It does not matter whether the author desire the good of the race or act merely from personal vanity. . . . In proportion as his work is exact, *i.e.* true to human consciousness and to the nature of man, as it is exact in formulation of desire, so it is durable and so it is 'useful'; I mean it maintains the precision and clarity of thought, not merely for the benefit of

¹ *How to Read*, p. 11.

² *How to Read*, p. 30.

³ *How to Read*, p. 52.

a few dilettantes and 'lovers of literature,' but maintains the health of thought outside literary circles and in non-literary existence, in general individual and communal life."¹

Mr. Pound renounces a "literary" audience and insists on the exact reproduction of experience, because he holds that view of the relation between literature and life which, we have said, exercises a profound influence on modern writers. Those who wish to bring literature close to life in this way not unnaturally display a marked dislike of art both in their criticism and in their creative work. "A lover of literature," said Professor Saintsbury, "is a holder of the high faith that it is the treatment that matters." We are now told that there should be no literary treatment; that experience, hitherto taken to be the raw material of art, should be accepted as its finished product.

"Modern" literature, then, should aim at being as nearly as possible like a piece of life, at reproducing as closely as possible a cultivated modern consciousness. If it is successful, therefore, it will be, like life itself, in a large measure dull, shapeless, and depressing. Such poetry is particularly liable to be praised and blamed on considerations not strictly aesthetic: those who are blessed with a typical modern consciousness are likely to praise it because it

¹ *How to Read*, p. 18.

is the kind of thing they like ; those who are not, may, with equal irrelevance, reject it because they find its tone and subject matter uncongenial.

The abandonment of art, however, is a process which leads writers not merely to express something unpleasant, but to write what cannot be understood. For if a poem is to be " exact, *i.e.* true to human consciousness," if it is to be, as far as is possible, simply the presentment of a state of feeling, if he who produces it has no other purpose in his mind than faithfulness to experience, it will inevitably contain much that is not intelligible. Our experience is a series of happenings in which the senses play their part as well as the understanding ; it is not ruled, as our thinking is, by a logical or intelligible scheme ; a picture of our consciousness, therefore, if it is to be full, faithful, or merely typical, must include much that is outside the sphere of the understanding.

If then a great deal of modern verse is nonsense, in the literal sense of that word, it may be so because those who wrote it are attempting to reproduce a " mode of feeling " or a " consciousness," and criticism of it which is based upon the assumption that they are trying to describe something, or to tell a story, or to transport their readers into the world of imagination, is likely to fall wide of its mark.

Two things have conspired to make the part played by the unintelligible in modern literature

particularly large. First, advances in the science of psychology ; second, the experiments of French writers who sixty years ago explored the possibilities of suggestion in poetry.

The influence of the study of psychology on contemporary poets and novelists is a topic that needs no elaboration. Those who have learned how much of our behaviour is independent of our reason and how great a dignity and importance are nowadays attributed to the subconscious, will understand that a writer whose aim is to reproduce a modern consciousness will spend much of his time conducting his readers through a sort of wonderland.

Belief in the close relation of literature to life has also given new force to the doctrine of the Symbolists, though it involves the betrayal of a fundamental article of their creed. Mallarmé and his followers deserted intelligibility in various ways and for various reasons, but with all of them the predominant aim was to create a new kind of aesthetic pleasure ; they neglected intelligibility in the interests of art. The modern poet who claims to be an inheritor of their tradition writes nonsense not for art's sake, but for the sake of truthfulness ; nothing more radically opposed to the creed of *l'art pour l'art* than the moralistic theory by which he would seek to justify his method. Art and intelligibility alike are victims which he must sacrifice in his endeavour to make

literature one with life, to make it reproduce an experience, or portray a consciousness, in which the irrational and the inartistic are alike important elements.

So, though the theories of the Symbolists have had much influence on some modern writers, few if any poets today remain true to their principles ; Mallarmé and Rimbaud are respected as the discoverers of the truth that nonsense has a value of its own, but now that they have given it a certificate in the realm of literature, nonsense is cultivated for reasons very different from theirs.

The Symbolists have another claim to be considered as forerunners of the writers of today, or at least to be held responsible for their unintelligibility. It was part of their aim to vindicate the importance of the individual. Rimbaud was a supreme egoist in Art ; all his allies alike refused to compromise with the world around them, to condescend to the common means of communication. The result of an artistic selfishness thus carried (as by Rimbaud) to the extreme, was that the poet wrote for himself alone. To those who had not the key to his personal treasury of associations what he wrote was completely unintelligible. This characteristic of Symbolist writing attaches to the work of many modern English poets, and one of the chief reasons for the unintelligibility of modern verse is the predominance of

associations that are personal to the writer. Egoism is carried so far that poems are written for the appreciation of which a complete account of their author's external and internal life is needed.

Such psychological diaries are produced naturally enough by those who wish to make literature an epitome of life : the poet is offering to his reader raw pieces of himself, and the reader is expected to accept without understanding them, by some unintellectual process of assimilation, much as St. John in the Apocalypse was given a book and told, not to read it, but to "eat it up."

Those who are concerned with social history or with a comparison of the arts might suggest other reasons why modern writers have, in Burke's phrase, "subtilized themselves into savages" by their renunciation of the intellect. The cause might be attributed, for instance, to the influence of the kaleidoscopic method of presentment of films, posters, and head-lines, or to the vogue of primitive and uncivilized forms in music and in painting. Such comparisons are interesting, but it is unsafe to seek in them for the causes of phenomena in the field of writing. It is more instructive to observe that literary theory has come into line with literary practice, and that a "scientific" school of critics has tried to eliminate the intelligible from the conceptions that criticism should employ. The philosophy of

“behaviourism,” which dismisses consciousness as an illusion and regards acts of the mind simply as physical reactions, naturally allows no difference in kind between a poem which sets in motion the process which we should call understanding and one which merely arouses a random series of images. Those who write unintelligible poetry therefore find themselves justified by the beliefs of an increasingly popular school of thought which in effect denies the existence of the intellect.

It is not only behaviourists who encourage the writing of poetry without meaning. That is the effect also of the attitude of a number of critics who, without accepting the behaviourist's assumptions, concern themselves primarily with the reactions of the reader, and look upon poetry partly as a record of the poet's own reactions, partly as a stimulant to others, or, as they call it, an “emotive force.”

Mr. I. A. Richards, who is probably the ablest and the most influential critic of this school, lays down with perfect justice that “Poetry affords the clearest example of . . . subordination of reference to attitude.” Indeed it is universally admitted that “reference”—relation to fact—is of trifling importance to a poet in comparison with the emotional effect that his words are calculated to produce ; but Mr. Richards contends that a sharp division can

be drawn between language as a means of reference and language as an "emotive" instrument, and a coincident distinction between the realm of knowledge and the realm of poetry. Knowledge is dead ; it is organized in mere statement ; poetry is alive, it provokes and prepares for action.¹

It is easy to see the effect that this theory will have upon writers already influenced by the ideas outlined above. It will persuade them that their business is merely to create emotions, attitudes, reactions, and that they are not concerned with knowledge or with statement. They will use language merely as an "emotive" instrument, and they will eschew the processes of logical connection and intelligible reference which properly belong to knowledge.

So it is that a theory, developed in part as a just analysis of the practice of some modern writers, leads other writers to believe that the abandonment of discursive thought and logical structure is demanded of those who would be true to sound poetic principles. So it is that the unintelligible, which is but one of the "modern" elements in the literature of today, may well be regarded as its most important feature.

¹ So he is able to link this part of his theory to the view that poetry must be "close to life" : poets, he says, are concerned with action, and a contemporary poet is not a mere artist, but potentially the saviour of the modern world. Hence it is of primary importance that he should be aware of and share in "modern modes of feeling."

The following essays concern only the cult of unintelligibility by modern writers ; the wider influences which may have led to this cult are not investigated in any further detail than in this introduction. The sole aim of the book is to make as plain as possible in what the obscurity of modern verse consists, and how it differs from orthodox writing in its neglect of the intelligible. Among both writers and readers there is a good deal of muddled thinking on this subject. The desire for novelty, the temptation to imitate admired examples, the ease of writing nonsense, pride in not being understood—all these encourage poets deliberately but without due reflection to abandon meaning. Small wonder that readers are confused, and attribute to them many aims of which they cannot have been conscious.

For instance, Gerard Manley Hopkins is generally acclaimed as a predecessor of the nonsense-writers of today, when in fact his real innovation lay in his peculiar choice of words—words which were most carefully chosen in order to express exact shades of meaning which he was always ready to explain by paraphrase.¹

Mistakes like this show how the assumptions which underlie modern writing are misunderstood both by

¹ The occasions on which Hopkins abandons intelligible sequence are comparatively rare. His obscurity is usually due to ellipsis, unusual word-order, use of strange words, or description of one kind of sensation (in the manner of Miss Sitwell) in the terms of another.

those who read and by those who produce it. If they were clearly understood a good deal of pretentious work which now is overpraised would suffer the judgment that it deserves, and the merits of thoughtful writers might be better appreciated. For one need point only to the works of so popular a writer as Virginia Woolf to show what can be done in a method of the kind here discussed by a clear-headed artist, conscious of her aim and of the implications of her technique and the limits within which it can profitably be applied. Indeed, the moral which this introduction seeks to draw cannot be more pointedly enforced than by setting side by side a passage from her prose and a passage from James Joyce. Nothing could more clearly illustrate the extremes that can be achieved by those who, in one way or another, exploit association at the expense of the intelligible. Mrs. Woolf is transcribing the reflections of a boy being bathed before he is put to bed ; the sponge is squeezed over him, and

“ water pours down the muscles of my spine. Bright arrows of sensation shoot on either side. I am covered with warm flesh. My dry crannies are wetted ; my cold body is warmed ; it is sluiced and gleaming. Water descends and sheets are like an eel. Now hot towels envelope me, and their roughness, as I rub my back, makes my blood purr. Rich and heavy sensations form on the roof of my mind ; down showers

the day—the woods and Elvedon ; Susan and the pigeon. Pouring down the walls of my mind, moving together, the day falls copious, resplendent.”

The passage loses, as must almost anything in Mrs. Woolf's novels, by being detached from its context. The cadences are units in a larger rhythm, the chosen sensations contribute to the picture of a particular individual and help to contrast him with other characters, the ideas and images themselves cannot be fully appreciated by those who are not familiar with experiences described earlier in the book. But this extract is enough to show that Mrs. Woolf has used every device of association—the chance juxtapositions of the subconscious, reminiscences peculiar to the individual, images which owe everything to feeling and nothing to intelligence, description of one sensation in the terms of another—to contribute to a work of art.

Mr. Joyce provides an example of similar methods differently employed. Already in *Ulysses* he used association so wildly that the result was often grotesque and often boring. In his *chef d'œuvre*, *Work in Progress*, he has gone further still. The following is a typical extract from that interminable work :

“ Helpmeet too, contrasta toga, his fiery goose-mother, woman who did, he tell princes of the age about. Meet the them, Avenlith, all viviparous out

of couple of lizards. She just as fenny as he is fulgar. How last soever her latest still her logs come up all standing. His checkmake of allaph fori verever her allierall and his Kuran never teachit her to be the owner of thy self. So she not swop her eekest hyem for Howarden's Castle, England Wales. But be the alleance of iern on his flamen vesta coat, the fibsule of brooch bronze to his winter mantle of pointefox."

It is not an unimportant matter that Mr. Joyce, a man of genius, should devote his life to writing this, that critics should applaud his endeavour, and a host of younger writers emulate it. It may be that Joyce himself, who is without doubt a serious artist, could produce, if he were challenged, a theory which would justify with perfect self-consistency his waste of so much paper, though no amount of theory could make such passages a whit more readable. But most of those who produce kindred writing nowadays seem to do so without knowing what they are about ; if their work is looked at carefully and coolly its fatuity becomes apparent ; and the detached critic may perhaps be forgiven if he offers an analysis of it to its blind admirers, with the words, " What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this set I forth unto you."

'Tis still a dream, or else such stuff as madmen
Tongue, and brain not ; either both, or nothing ;
Or senseless speaking, or a speaking such
As sense cannot untie.

Cymbeline, IV. iv. 145.

I

MEANING AND ASSOCIATION

§ I. "*Meaning*"

IN ONE very obvious respect literature differs from the other arts : its works are composed of words. Those who study it, therefore, and attempt to discover how its effects are obtained, find themselves confronted, on the very threshold of their inquiry, by the problem of significance. Words are, primarily, vehicles of meaning ; it is chiefly in order to convey his meaning that they are used by the writer, and a student of literature may be tempted to open his investigation by asking what meaning is. It is well to realize at the outset that this inquiry is doomed to failure, for the nature of meaning can never be fully explained in words. Every intelligible series of words, however, provides an example of meaning, and though it is impossible to define meaning, there are certain things that may be said about it. To be intelligible, a series of words must express thought ; the simplest form which thought can take is the judgment, of which the ordinary verbal form is a proposition (" A is B "), and when we search for the meaning of a set of words we are really trying to find what judgment or series of judgments it is intended

to express. On the other hand, meaning does not depend upon grammatical form ; many utterances which are not grammatically sentences are none the less intelligible, and could be reduced to the form of propositions without any violence being done to their meaning.

A piece of thinking, however, which is at all complicated or lengthy cannot be expressed in a single proposition ; it demands a series of more or less simple propositions to express it, and the connections that may subsist between the judgments ¹ that compose it are manifold and hardly possible to catalogue or define. Suffice it to say that we cannot understand the whole series unless we understand how its parts are connected ; its meaning is not an aggregate formed by adding up the meanings of the component propositions, any more than the meaning of a sentence is the sum of the meanings of the words composing it ; if the whole is to be completely intelligible the connections within it must be so too.

We may therefore find a series of words unintelligible either because they cannot be reduced to a proposition,² or because though propositional in

¹ Or, more accurately, "between those matters the thought of which constitutes the component judgments."

² As for example the following poem by Mr. Ezra Pound :

Spring . . .
Too long . . .
Gongula . . .

form they do not express a piece of thinking,¹ or because though they constitute a number of simple propositions, each in itself easy to understand, the connections between these propositions are not rational, and the series as a whole does not express a single movement of the mind.² Any attempt to define "a piece of thinking" or "a rational connection" would raise metaphysical problems of considerable difficulty. Can we call "intelligible" a piece of writing which contains self-contradictions and impossible conceptions? can we say that it is a "piece of thinking," and speak of its "meaning"? Clearly we can for practical purposes; clearly we can think about imaginary things; and clearly, in any event, it would be foolish to let the difficulties that obscure the borderline between what is intelligible and what is not blind us to the difference between the two fields that it divides. The inquirer may be encouraged to leave such questions unanswered by reflecting that anyone who asks what is the meaning of meaning acknowledges by his very question his familiarity with the conception of which he professes ignorance.

¹ As the following, from *Work in Progress*, by Mr. James Joyce: "Hightime is ups" and "Light at night has an Alps on his druck house."

² As for instance the passage from *The Waste Land* quoted below at p. 48.

§ 2. *Association of Words and of Ideas*

Writers of verse today are less concerned with meaning than was usual with writers in the past. The difference, it is true, is often only a difference of degree. It has always been recognized that words do more than merely express meaning ; they sound, and they suggest ; literature gives an especial importance to their other functions, and those other functions have always played a more important part in verse than they have in prose. Verse, also, has always cared less about the truth of its meaning, than has prose : didactic and narrative verse are the only kinds of verse that seek to impart information, and between them they form a very small proportion of the verse that has been written—partly because it is difficult to write good verse which is tied to fact, partly because it is difficult to impart information fully and clearly without breaking the rules of metre. But the writers who desert meaning today do not do so for the reasons which provoked a reaction from the didactic and moralistic attitude of many Victorian writers,¹ they abandon not a meaning of a parti-

¹ " I saw . . . that Swinburne in one way, Browning in another, and Tennyson in a third, had filled their work with what I called 'impurities,' curiosities about politics, about science, about history, about religion ; and that we must create once more the pure work." W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 207. " Pure Poetry," in Mr. George Moore's anthology of that name, meant poetry free from " impurities " of this kind—a very different thing from the " *poésie pure* " of M. Brémond (*v. infr.* p. 96).

cular kind—not merely a “message,” but meaning altogether. They exalt instead other functions of language, hitherto considered subsidiary, and exploit them so that the element of meaning is often not merely overshadowed but quite ignored.

Among the qualities which are supposed to distinguish present-day literature from what has gone before it, it is worth while to emphasize this innovation. It is perhaps the only one the effects of which are fundamental. Modern poetry, we are told, is unflinchingly realistic ; it describes in detail, and at times with a perverted relish, objects, emotions, situations that are degraded and revolting—as if it were not the familiar practice of poets from Catullus to Crabbe to eschew beauty and conventional decency in their choice of subject and language ; again, it is claimed for contemporary writers that they have discovered that there are no peculiarly “poetic” or “literary” subjects—a discovery in which the Lake poets anticipated them by more than a century ; and when in their revolt against mere emotionalism modern poets use verse to express subtle and complicated trains of thought, they are only reviving a practice which was worked to its extreme three hundred years ago by poets of the school called metaphysical. In poetry which finds little room for images of beauty, which eschews a poetic vocabulary and refuses to dismiss any word

as unpoetic, which will not allow that any field of experience is especially suited to literary description, or that any lies outside a writer's sphere, in poetry which is "intellectual" and often obscure—in such poetry there is nothing new.

These qualities are not new, and they are comparatively superficial. What is fundamental is the change affecting the part played by thought itself in the writer's work. The revolution lies not merely in the exploitation of the powers of language other than meaning, but in the fact that in their exploitation, meaning is itself abandoned.

It is impossible to appreciate the novelty of this method without examining somewhat closely the associative power of language and the use that has been made of it by orthodox writers in the past.

That words possess associations as well as sound and significance is presupposed by the use of such a term as "poetic vocabulary" and by a tradition which regards certain words as "poetic" and others, though they are synonymous, as "unpoetic." If we consider foreign literature, most of all perhaps if we consider classical literature, it becomes plain how large a part in determining our judgment of literature must be played, though often we do not know it, by verbal association. In English literature nine-tenths of the writer's material must consist of words

familiar to us from their use outside his work, and outside all literature, familiar from their use by ourselves in our life of every day. Almost every word in our language becomes overlaid and incrustated with layers and clusters of purely verbal associations—that is to say, there are ideas evoked in most minds by the use of a particular word which would not be evoked by the use of its synonym. In our reading of classical literature, written as it is in a language not made familiar by everyday speech, this cannot be : our range of association is not so wide, and is very different in character. Although, through its meaning, a Latin word may evoke a cluster of ideas closely or exactly similar to those suggested by its English equivalent, the ideas evoked by hearing the word itself (in so far as we can distinguish them from the ideas evoked by the thought of what it signifies) belong not to the world in which we live, but to the world of classical antiquity. A little reflection shows that a Greek or Latin word recalls other occasions of its use, that these belong to classical literature, and that the setting to which it belongs is thus peculiar and insulated.

This quality of classical literature all translation, simply because it involves a change of language, must destroy ; and most is lost where the words in question are most simple. Where translation is easiest, it has often least hope of being perfectly

successful. Take for example a recently discovered fragment of Ibycus :

οἱ καὶ Δαρδανίδα Πριάμοιο μέ-
 γ' ἄστν περικλεῆς ὄλβιον ἡνάρων
 Ἀργοθεν ὀρτυμένοι
 Ζηνὸς μεγάλοιο βουλαῖς,
 ξανθᾶς Ἑλένας περὶ εἶδει
 δῆριν πολύνυμον ἔχοντες
 πόλεμον κατὰ δακρύνοντα. . . .

nothing is easier than to convey the meaning of this in English, nothing harder than to clothe that meaning in English words which will transmit to us an effect like that of the Greek. Wherein lies the peculiar appeal of Greek tragedy and epic ? Not only in their wisdom and their pathos, not only in their portrayal, by a succession of bright images, of a world of heroic deed and thought, but also in the fact that that world and those images, often in themselves (as in the example quoted) trivial and easy to recognize and easy in any language to express, are conveyed in words which for us are soiled by no ignoble use, but are known from and recall only the language and the thought of Sophocles, of Homer, of Thucydides.

It is for just this reason that a full appreciation of the classics is difficult : we cannot know fully the associations which different words carried for the readers of Greece and Rome, and it is only in so far as

we recapture those associations that we can judge the classics as literature : this is why it is difficult for the school boy, who depends upon a dictionary in which each word is provided with a bare English equivalent, to feel the quality of the Greek and Roman books that he is given to read. Yet we are gainers as well as losers : if we have lost many relevant and valuable associations, we have lost also many that must have been irrelevant and disturbing, capricious, due to fashion and to common speech—obstacles which hinder our appreciation of literature written in the tongue we speak.

A more familiar example of the associations of words is to be found nearer home, in the language of the Bible and the Liturgy. To wax old is but to grow old, and what comes to pass is what happens and no more, but such phrases will dye a piece of prose with the colour of the Old Testament, just as a word familiar to us from the prayers and devotions of our youth will diffuse over the least ecclesiastical of contexts, faint but unmistakable, the fragrance of the hassock and the pew.

There is a fashion in words ; the earliest of our great poets bears witness to this, and in doing so provides an excellent example of the truth ; “ Ye knowe eek,” says Chaucer,

“ Ye knowe eek, that in forme of speche is chaunge
With-inne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho

That hadden prys, now wonder nice and straunge
Us thinketh hem ; and yet they spake hem so,
And spedde as wel in love as men now do."

Troilus and Criseyde, Bk. 2, lines 22-26.

So, too, the dramatist of Elizabeth's day could, at moments of high tragedy, use words which today in such a context would provoke a laugh, though the ideas which they convey are not ridiculous and seem to us perfectly dignified if otherwise expressed. Even the dignity of Milton seems now in places a little precarious : " Our English language alters quickly," as Tennyson observed ; " this great line would be almost commonplace now : The dismal situation waste and wild." ¹ In the eighteenth century a poetic vocabulary, strict and limited, was *de rigueur*, and it dominated literature so strongly that today it is impossible to use without unfortunate effect many of the words that composed it, simply because those words, though the ideas they convey are familiar and inoffensive, are indissolubly connected in the minds of educated people with a particular literary setting.

Any writer, therefore, who cares for something more than to express a meaning must choose carefully the words which are to stand for the ideas that he wishes to convey. But the scope for discrimination would be small if it were confined to those occa-

¹ *Paradise Lost*, I. 60 ; see his son's *Memoir of Tennyson*, II. 518.

sions where the writer has two perfect synonyms to choose from. Synonyms admittedly are rare. But most words have a wide range of reference, overlapping that of other words, and this range is narrowed down, whenever a word is used, by the demands of the context in which it appears. The writer, therefore, will almost always have at his command a number of words which are not perfectly synonymous, but any one of which he may use to convey the same idea. Between these words he is free to choose, and his choice will be determined partly by the difference between their sounds, and very largely by the associations which he will evoke by using them.

It has been observed that instead of writing

“ The uncertain glory of an April day ”

Shakespeare might have written

“ The fickle splendour of an April day.”

Though the differing words are not synonymous—there are contexts which “ fickle ” and “ splendour ” would suit, and “ uncertain ” and “ glory ” would not—yet the meaning of the first of these two lines is practically the same as the meaning of the second. Their total effects are worlds apart, and, the difference is not to be measured by showing how far the words are from being synonymous, how far the meaning of one line differs from that of the

other ; it is the result partly of a difference in sound, but more of the difference between the spheres of association to which the words in question belong and which they evoke.¹

Verbal association is a strong weapon in the hands of the poet. But it is far from being his strongest weapon, and meaning and sound are not its only rivals.

All that has been said of the associations borne by words remains true in a field where it has more scope and more importance—the field of ideas. Associations are evoked, not merely by hearing a particular word, but also by the thought of the object which the word is used to indicate.² And since, as we have seen, the range of choice between different words is limited, it is chiefly in the field of ideas³ that the writer has to exercise his discrimination—

¹ Another and more subtle way in which a writer can vary the effect of what he says, without changing either its meaning or the ideas conveyed or even the words that he uses, is by altering the order of his words and by repetition. Sometimes this produces a change only of emphasis, sometimes a change of atmosphere. "Talent Mr. Micawber has," said his wife, "capital Mr. Micawber has not." In her choice, arrangement, and repetition of words Mrs. Micawber showed herself an artist.

² These associations would of necessity be evoked also by its synonym, though each synonym might in addition evoke different associations of its own.

³ This may be taken in the present passage to mean either "objects thought about" or "thinkings of objects." Strictly, it seems that it must be the latter that are associated in our minds.

his sense of what makes one acceptable, another not. Almost every idea that enters our minds is attended by a retinue of associated ideas, of which we may be more or less unconscious ; these are determined by the dominant idea itself, and by our own past experience, and they vary, within wide limits, from mind to mind. These variegated congregations are often spoken of as sequences, and an idea is said to start a "train" of associations. It would be a better, though it is a vaguer, description, to say that each idea (as does each word in the case of verbal associations) creates an atmosphere. We recognize the idea as having a background of its own, as belonging to a certain world, a certain setting ; its effect is to transport us in mind to that setting. A host of other images attend upon it and contribute, unrecognized, to its immediate effect upon us. At the mention, for instance, of a sunset, of Death, of a snake, of Cleopatra, a change is wrought immediately in our minds (whether we recognize it or not) which is more than the mere identification of a reference.¹

Yeats has eloquently described the part played in poetry by the associations with which meaning may

¹ It is worth noting that many of the richest and most poignant associations of words and of ideas are owed to their previous occurrence in literature itself, and a writer may thus strengthen his appeal to a well-read audience by veiled or overt allusions to the work of his predecessors. This is a method of exploiting association which seems to have been popular with Latin writers, and has been revived nowadays notably by Mr. T. S. Eliot.

be invested. "There are no lines," he says,¹ "with more melancholy beauty than these by Burns :

The white moon is setting behind the white wave,
And Time is setting with me, O !

and these lines are perfectly symbolical. Take from them the whiteness of the moon and of the wave, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty. But, when all are together, moon and wave and whiteness and setting Time and the last melancholy cry, they evoke an emotion which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms." "All sounds, all colours, all forms," he continues a little later, "either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions."²

To make the fullest use of the associative value both of words and of what words stand for has been the task of writers since literature was first attempted. Whether they knew it or not, poets have always done this, and insensitiveness in this matter is one of the most damning marks of a poet's incompetence. "Le devoir, le travail, la fonction du poète sont de mettre en évidence et en action ces puissances de

¹ *The Symbolism of Poetry, Essays*, p. 191.

² Yeats himself would call such writing "symbolical" and explain its effects by a mystical belief in the "preordained energies" of the symbols rather than by calling in aid the psychological phenomena of association.

mouvement et d'enchantement, ces excitants de la vie affective et de la sensibilité intellectuelle, qui sont fondues dans le langage usuel avec les signes et les moyens de communication de la vie ordinaire et superficielle.”¹ This observation is true—though there is no reason why its application should be limited to the poet—and its truth, with reference both to words and to ideas, has long been recognized. This use of language is one of the things that distinguishes the art of literature from mere writing.²

¹ Paul Valéry, *Varia II*, p. 170.

² Two books which give to this aspect of literary art its due attention have been published of recent years : *Words and Poetry* by G. H. W. Rylands (Hogarth Press, 1928) and *Seven Types of Ambiguity* by W. Empson (Chatto and Windus, 1930). The former, by an examination of the use of many of the commonest and most “effective” words in literature, shows how deeply our appreciation of their effects is influenced by our unconscious memory of their occurrence in particular contexts, and their recurrence in contexts of a particular kind. The latter, though not written with the purpose, admirably illustrates the wealth of associations which enter into every sort of English poetry ; it is concerned with “ambiguities,” which the author defines at the outset as “any consequence of language, however slight, which adds some nuance to the direct statement of prose,” and in it Mr. Empson explores with perverse and elaborate ingenuity the nuances which he detects in a number of famous poems. The scheme of the book is to treat these as “ambiguities,” i.e., alternative “meanings” which are said to have been, to a large degree, present to the author’s mind and intended by him. The result is a series of fantastic misconstructions of familiar poems. But the book succeeds at least in showing how large a number of different associations might be evoked in different minds by the poems in question with or without the intention of their authors.

§ 3. *Abandonment of Meaning*

Modern writers, therefore, do not break new ground in paying attention to the effects of association: what is new in their writing is the result of their paying attention to association alone, and exploiting it so thoroughly that meaning is entirely or almost entirely superseded.¹ Orthodox writers used association to enrich and to reinforce their meaning; modern writers are inclined either to give such free rein to the associations between ideas in their own minds that their meaning is irrecoverably obscured, or else to abandon intelligible structure entirely, and to put together quite illogical collections of words and of ideas in order that they may conjure with the associations that those words and those ideas convey.

¹ It is consistent with what is said above that lines and phrases of orthodox poetry, detached from their context, should act upon us as such modern poems are intended to act. Everyone will recognize Mr. Forrest Reid's experience of reading poetry in his childhood (*Apostate*, p. 187): "A single line, sometimes even a single word, was sufficient to produce this peculiar effect, as of a drug acting not upon the senses but on the imagination." The Symbolist wishes his whole poem to have the effect of such a stray phrase or series of such stray phrases (*v. infr.* pp. 30 *sqq.*). Even the supersession of meaning throughout a poem has been achieved, more or less completely, by orthodox writers, though not necessarily as a result of conscious design. Swinburne, who was influenced by, but never really understood, the early Symbolists, provides excellent examples. Many familiar nursery rhymes and "nonsense verses" are of this kind. "This poem," says Mr. Forrest Reid (*Apostate*, p. 23), writing of a nursery song, "possessed for me a peculiar fascination, though I knew no more what it meant than I now know what Blake's *Crystal Cabinet* means. I liked it simply because it called up a series of tragic pictures."

They are not merely exploiting association as their forefathers did before them, but deserting meaning for something else.

Meaning indeed, in one sense of the word, none but the most extreme of modern writers have abandoned—that is, in the sense in which each word may be said to have a meaning of its own. Convention has determined what idea ¹ or ideas are to be conveyed to the mind by any word, and these ideas (or, more strictly, other words that convey them) are collected in the dictionary after the word in question, and called its “meaning.” Meaning of this kind is indispensable even to the associative writer. For it is the idea primarily conveyed by a word that starts the train of its associations ² and more than anything

¹ Some words, *e.g.* prepositions, can perhaps hardly be said by themselves to convey a meaning, or to be connected in our minds with an idea ; many words seem to have no more separate existence than word-terminations in an inflected language. The word “idea” is of necessity used somewhat loosely in this series of essays ; it may stand for all the act of thinking, or for that which is thought of, or for a mental picture, or even, in some contexts, for something which might be expressed as a judgment. But this looseness should not vitiate the argument.

² An attempt is sometimes made to abolish the distinction between meaning and suggestive power ; to treat the idea primarily conveyed by a word as simply one among the ideas which the use of it suggests. It is true that in practice we cannot convey the one without in some measure arousing the others ; but this is no reason for denying the difference in kind between an idea attached by custom to a particular word and a varying collection of ideas aroused by its use. Thus to treat meaning as a kind of suggestion may be tempting when we think of poetry, because in poetry suggestion overshadows meaning ; it is less plausible when we consider a mathematical proposition or a legal enactment.

else creates the atmosphere to which for us the word belongs. Of the least intelligible writers, then, it may at least be said what their words mean. But it must be remembered that a word rarely "means" exactly the same thing on any two occasions when it is used, and that its use on a single occasion may convey two very different objects of thought to two different readers. In law and in mathematics we try to define our references exactly, in poetry they are often left intentionally vague, and the suggestive power of the writing may be thereby increased. When Swinburne writes of "The shaking of the sources of the sea" it is difficult to say what the phrase means; different persons will interpret it differently; and it seems that Swinburne was paying small attention to the meaning of the phrase and more to the associational value of the component words. But, with these reservations, it remains true that the meaning of words is retained even by those writers whose aim it is to abandon the meaning of discourse.

Merely because a writer acknowledges the dictionary, however, and uses words as words, and not merely as noises, he cannot claim that he has not abandoned meaning and that his work must be called intelligible. For properly speaking it is not words that mean, but we, the users of them, and our meaning (as was said at the outset) is not the aggré-

gate of the dictionary meanings of the words we use but a complex whole of thought. And it is clearly possible to exploit the associative value of words and ideas at the expense of the intelligible whole, to which the ideas themselves contribute or even without having any such intelligible whole in our mind at all.

Writers, we have said, have always chosen their ideas, just as they have chosen their words, so as to enforce and enrich by association the matter that they wish to convey.¹ Let us see what guides the orthodox writer in his choice of ideas, and how his practice differs from that of the writer who has abandoned meaning. First, we must understand clearly the nature of the choice. Just as the writer rarely finds two perfectly synonymous words, but exercises his choice between words either of which, in the context of which he intends to use it, will convey the same idea; so, in the field of ideas he has a choice between different objects of thought, which, despite their difference, will any of them convey—by a different path, as it were—what is in his mind. He will judge between these rivals by considering the associations that they

¹ It is possible, even in literature, as well as in "useful" writing, to attend to meaning alone; Yeats (*Autobiographies*, p. 349) speaks of the discovery that it is possible in writing "to eliminate from the mind all emotional implication and to prefer plain water to every vintage, so much metropolitan lead and solder to any tendril of the vine."

convey and their suitability to the atmosphere that he wishes to create. It is perhaps inaccurate to say that two sets of ideas express the same meaning. Consider such examples as the following stanzas from Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam* :

“ How sweet is mortal sovranty ! ”—think some :
Others—“ How blest the Paradise to come ! ”
Ah, take the Cash in hand and waive the Rest ;
Oh, the brave music of a *distant* Drum !

and

Some for the glories of this world, and some
Sigh for the Prophet's Paradise to come ;
Ah, take the Cash, and let the Promise go,
Nor heed the music of a distant Drum !

It may be questioned whether strictly our meaning does not consist simply of the precise objects of our thought or the ideas that stand for them, and that any change in these constituent ideas is necessarily itself a change in meaning, even if what we might be tempted to call the total meaning remains unchanged. The “ meaning ” that stays unchanged despite a change in ideas, and allowing a freedom in their choice, is more properly described as subject, theme, or intention. So, we “ mean ” the same person whether when speaking of him we make use of the idea of “ Blind Maconides ” or “ the author of the Iliad,” or simply “ Homer,” in that our subject is the same ; and so the alternative versions

of the stanza in Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam* have the same "meaning" in that their theme or intention is the same ; yet the ideas that they contain, and the objects of thought that they express, are different, that the poet can hardly be said properly to mean the same by either version.

As has been said, however, a poet—however orthodox—is usually less concerned with his precise meaning than with its accompaniments ; it is the theme or purpose in his mind that will be dominant, and he will choose between ideas expressive of it on the lines that have been suggested.

Metaphor is an excellent example of the field in which such choice is exercised. In choosing between a variety of metaphors, a writer will be guided, just as he is in his choice of words, very largely by the different worlds to which the images which constitute his metaphor belong ; it matters as much to him that they should suit his mood, the quality of his feeling, as that they should help in the expression of his meaning : they must have a two-fold fitness. Fidelity to his meaning will circumscribe, but it will not eliminate, his choice.

It is a crude analysis that supposes a writer to start with a meaning in his mind, and then to decide by what set of ideas he is to convey that meaning and in what words he is to dress those ideas for presentation to his audience. The poet, especially the lyric

poet, is usually little concerned with any intellectual process, the thoughts he wishes to convey are usually simple and are overlaid by the feelings which accompany them ; mood and emotion will help to govern the movement of his thought, and there will be frequent gaps in the logical structure of his poem, which he leaves it to the sympathy and intelligence of his reader to supply ; in poetry, therefore, the intelligible skeleton is often tenuous and ill-articulated. It is for this reason that metaphysical verse, in which the intellect plays a leading part, seems to some a strange and unnatural kind of poetry ; and it is for a kindred reason that the poetry which eschews meaning is usually lyrical. Yet even in lyrical poetry, if it is of the orthodox kind, the intelligible skeleton is there, and from the finished work it is possible to abstract a meaning. This meaning may be a poor thing, in itself not worth seeking and not worth expressing, but it is there, it can be abstracted, it might have been otherwise expressed. The poet might have chosen different words to express it, or he might have used a different set of ideas to express his theme—his “ meaning ” in a wider sense. Had the writer expressed himself differently, the work of art would have been different, and it is just this possible difference which is his main concern as an artist. It follows that it is possible, though the operation is often a cruel one, and little short of

murder, to paraphrase or translate the work of a writer who works on these principles : the process destroys a work of art, and leaves something less, and that something is the bare, abstracted, meaning. " I grant," says Dryden, " that something must be lost in all Transfusion, that is, in all Translations ; but the Sense will remain."

On the other hand, the writer who is concerned solely with association has no skeleton of thought to constrain him : he cares only for the ideas which words stand for and for their associative value ; and they have only to suit a mood or an atmosphere, not to express something intelligible. His choice of words will therefore be determined solely by *their* " meaning," *i.e.*, the ideas they stand for or evoke ; those ideas will not subserve any complex meaning which it is in *his* mind to express.¹ The element of discourse disappears : " l'œuvre pure," as Mallarmé observed, " implique la disparition du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots."

The principles on which such writers build their

¹ Hence, if he is faithful to his aim, his work will be built of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, words conveying images related at best by a colourless " and," and he will have small use for prepositions and conjunctions, except in so far as conjunctive words enter necessarily into the " ideas " (which are themselves often arbitrary fragments of intelligible thinking) that constitute his poem. This can be verified from the works of the French Symbolists and from such poems as those quoted on p. 41 of this book.

unintellectual structures of ideas are various, and will presently be discussed ; we may summarize them by saying that sometimes it seems that the attempt to convey a simple structure of intelligible thought has been abandoned, and the writer wishes only to make play with ideas by means of the associations that they carry ; sometimes he seems solely to be concerned with recording, not his conscious thoughts, but the scenery of his semi-conscious mind, a phantasmagoria of images and inchoate passages of reflection. In either case his work will be unintelligible, and it will not be his purpose to be understood. Such writing is the subject of the next essay in this book.

Most modern writing, however, does not seem to be as true to the new principle as that. Much of it (and this is the subject of the third essay), seems clearly to be written round an intelligible structure : the forms of grammar, the sentence, the syntactical sequence, though often only intermittent, all are there as in the writing to which we are accustomed. But it seems impossible to recognize the subjects of the writer's thought, or to understand how they are connected in his mind. And the difficulty of understanding it is not, it appears, quite an ordinary kind of difficulty ; the work does not only seem hard, it seems somehow to be infected with unintelligibility.

This middle kind of writing is also new, and its

governing principle is the same as that already described. In it, association is exploited, not indeed in substitution for meaning, but at its expense. For though he has at the back of his mind a meaning which, more or less, governs what he says, he does not choose his words in order to express it. Associations, often purely personal associations, seem to be allowed free play, and to be indulged for their own sake, not in order to enlighten or enrich a meaning which might be expressed without them. Here there is scope for degree : in so far as reason governs the structure and in so far as his associations are common to his readers, his work (though it may be difficult) will be intelligible. But the value set upon association is so high, and there is such pride in idiosyncrasy, that much modern writing may be said to have abandoned meaning, because intelligence can play little part in its appreciation, and merely to read it and to think is no help towards understanding it.

One step further along the road which leads away from meaning it is possible to take ; and that step, which has been taken notably (in some of her work) by Miss Gertrude Stein, involves abandoning not only intelligible structure, but the "meanings" of words themselves. Words, when used thus, are not intended to convey ideas ; they are merely vocal noises, out of which the artist tries to compose a pattern. The Symbolists did not express in their

writings any connected "meaning" of their own; "ils cédaient l'initiative aux mots"; the mere pattern-maker would strip language of that remaining significance, in order to make a mosaic, not of ideas, but simply of familiar sounds. To do this is difficult enough, for whenever words are used, significance (or the illusion of significance) keeps breaking in. The chief weapon which Miss Stein uses to expel it is repetition: lest, when she says "we" once, the reader should suppose that she is using the first person plural, she repeats it a dozen times, or alternates it almost interminably with another noise, till her page presents a visual pattern almost as vivid as the audible pattern to create which seems to be her only object. Whatever may be said of the result, it cannot be denied that Miss Stein is a conscious artist, and that her work in this vein is a thorough-going example of writing from which meaning has taken wing. If it is to be criticized it must be criticized not because it fails to move us as poetry, but, as a pattern, for an ugliness and futility that are all its own.

II

SYMBOLISM AND SUGGESTION

Les mots que conglomère encore l'artifice de la logique,
il les faut disjoindre, isoler.

ANDRÉ GIDE.

§ I

THAT A writer should try to express a certain state of feeling or to create a certain state of feeling in others, in itself is nothing new : since the remotest antiquity that has been the aim of poets and of rhetoricians. Writers of today break new ground when they try to achieve this purpose without the mediation of intelligible thought, and put ideas into their readers' heads without desiring to be understood.

When he does this, a writer abrogates the special function of literature, and brings it nearer to the other, the inarticulate arts. This was realized by Mallarmé, who declared that his aim was to recover "un art d'achever la transposition, au Livre, de la symphonie",¹ and it was perhaps this same relation

¹ Pater's famous remark that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music" is a little too vague to be valuable here ; and Poe's pronouncements on the nature of the poetic principle, which influenced so deeply the Symbolists themselves, do not seem sufficiently to distinguish between the claim that the intelligible should be eliminated from poetry, on the one hand, and, on the other, the assertion that the musical element of sound is of great importance, while truth or faithfulness to fact is of small importance,

between the arts that Dryden had in mind when he said that music was "inarticulate poesy,"

In such writing, the idea fulfils a function akin to that of a note in music, and because it has no place in any complex of thought critics have been ready to speak of its being used as a sort of "charm" or "magic," and Baudelaire, probably for this reason, spoke of poetry as a "magie suggestive." The phrase is misleading: the idea, thus used, is no more a charm than is a note in music or a line or figure in a visual pattern. It does not work through the faculty of reasoning; but is not the more magical for that; the processes of our reason are themselves just as mysterious as are our reactions to what we hear or see. Mallarmé himself, though he devoted much attention to the theory of his art, does not seem to have always preserved clearly in his mind the difference between mystery and suggestion. He seems to have been trying to practise an art—and in some of his poems to have achieved it—from which the appeal to reason had been eliminated, being replaced entirely by suggestion. And it was as elements in this art that he employed symbols, which were apparently supposed to convey to the reader the artist's intention without the mediation

to a poet. On the other side, Tolstoy's wholesale attack on Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, and the Symbolist and Decadent movement (*What is Art?* ch. x.) was founded on a muddled conception of their aims and principles.

of the discursive intellect. Yet at other times he insists that the essence of poetry is mystery, and declares that he makes use of symbols, instead of stating and defining like the Parnassiens, in order that the reader, mystified by the *imprécis*, may be continually puzzled about the exact meaning that his symbols are intended to convey; and his interpreters have found in his poems intelligible unities, obscure only because it is uncertain what ideas the symbols are supposed to represent.

The same diversity, or uncertainty, of aim characterized the whole school of Symbolists:¹ "Certains, qui conservaient les formes traditionnelles du vers, français, s'étudiaient à éliminer les descriptions, les sentences, les moralités, les précisions arbitraires; ils purgeaient leur poésie de presque tous ces éléments intellectuels que la musique ne peut exprimer. D'autres donnaient à tous les objets des significations infinies qui supposaient une métaphysique cachée. Ils usaient d'un délicieux matériel ambigu."² What at least they had in common was the desire somehow to

¹ "Symbolism" is used in these essays to refer to those French writers of the second half of the last century whose theories were most clearly formulated by Mallarmé and most boldly practised by Rimbaud. Arthur Symonds' book *The Symbolist Movement* gives a sympathetic and interesting account of them. It would be possible to quote from almost any page of a Symbolist passages which belie what is said of their principles. That is because Symbolism was always an aim rather than an achievement.

² Valéry, *Variété*, p. 96.

banish all expression of thought from their work, and the result of their endeavour was that, in the words of Valéry "la pensée abstraite jadis admise dans le vers même", became "presque impossible à combiner avec ces émotions immédiates que l'on souhaitait de provoquer à chaque instant; exilée d'une poésie qui se voulait réduire à son essence propre; effarouchée par les effets multipliés de surprise et de musique que le goût moderne exigeait."¹

Despite inconsistencies, therefore, despite betrayals of theory by practice, it is true to say that the endeavour of the Symbolists was to substitute suggestion for thought in literature: in the words of Arthur Symons: "To evoke by some elaborate, instantaneous magic of language, without the formality of an after all impossible description; to be, rather than to express: that is what Mallarmé has consistently, and from the first, sought in verse and prose."² Rimbaud, with more daring and greater

¹ *Ib.* p. 97. It is difficult to see what precisely is the qualification intended to be added by the word *abstraite* to *pensée* in this observation. Rémy de Gourmont in his Essay *Questions d'Art*, has some interesting remarks on the uncertainty of Mallarmé's aims (*Problème du Style*, 1907, pp. 200-201).

² *The Symbolist Movement*, second edition, p. 128. Symons continues: "To say that he has found what he sought is impossible; but (is it possible to avoid saying?) how heroic a search, and what marvellous discoveries by the way!" The Symbolists, as Symons indicates, cultivated association in the interests of art. It has been left to the Surréalistes who claim to carry on the symbolist tradition, to cultivate the unconscious (of which thought and association are alike processes, though unconscious thought is com-

insight, was engaged in the same pursuit ; he has recorded its history, in flashes, in that section of *Une Saison en Enfer* which is called *Alchimie du verbe*. M. Paul Claudel, in his preface to Rimbaud's works, has described how Rimbaud used language when it had undergone this transmutation : he used it as we use it in a state of semi-consciousness, when "le langage en nous prend une valeur moins d'expression que de signe ; les mots fortuits qui montent à la surface de l'esprit, le refrain, l'obsession d'une phrase continuelle, forment une espèce d'incanta-

paratively rare) for its own sake and in opposition to art. The following passage is interesting in its attempt to link Surréalisme with Symbolism—an attempt founded on the fact that the two movements both eschew conscious thought. "Poe was the first to realize . . . that a scientific treatise differs from a poem in that the purpose of the latter is to give an indistinct pleasure. Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry, have all tended more and more to isolate in poetry the essence thereof. Concerned to suggest a mood, a state of reverie, they have necessarily been led into a certain obscurity of expression . . . Finally, the Surréalistes have seen how the qualities which they regard as of paramount importance—inventiveness and creative spontaneity—are shackled by the intellect, and, understanding that the intellect is no more than a fraction of reality, they have accordingly denied that either reality or intellect is supreme. They want to speak the words of the unconscious, as the Sibyl spoke the words of the god ; hence the licence of their grammatical and perspective deformations, the free rein they give to associative thought." ("Surrealism and Madness" in *This Quarter*, Sept. 1932—an issue devoted to the excesses of the Surréaliste movement). Pursuing this aim to its conclusion, the Surréalistes imitate deliberately in their writings the mental processes of lunatics : "Surrealism now aims at recreating a condition which will be in no way inferior to mental derangement. Its ambition is to lead us to the edge of madness and make us feel what is going on in the magnificently disordered minds of those whom the community shuts up in asylums." (Henri Barranger, "Surrealism in 1931" in *Le Centaure*.)

tion." When literature has become incantation, it is on its way towards becoming music.

The approach of literature towards music, by its reliance upon the process of suggestion, is clearly recognized in another passage in Mallarmé's *Divagation relativement au vers* :—"Symboliste, Décadente ou Mystique, les Ecoles se déclarant, ou étiquetées en hâte par notre presse d'information, adoptent, comme rencontre, le point d'un Idéalisme qui (pareillement aux fugues, aux sonates) refuse les matériaux naturels et, comme brutale, une pensée directe les ordonnant ; pour ne garder rien que la suggestion." "Rien que la suggestion" : never before in literature had that element been isolated ; never before had a writer frankly attempted to reduce literature to pure incantation ; the history of the Symbolist movement has been the history of various attempts to explore the field thus indicated, and the controversy that has raged over *La Poésie Pure* is concerned with the endeavour to define its limits and to describe its nature.

Valéry has in mind exactly this tendency, when he says that literature has become "an art which is based on language as a creator of illusions, and not on language as a means of transmitting realities. Everything which makes language more precise, everything which emphasises its practical character, all the changes which it undergoes in the interests

of a more rapid transmission and an easier diffusion, are contrary to its function as a poetic instrument.”¹ Like much of Valéry’s critical work, this sentence abounds in errors but indicates an important truth : it is not true that language loses its power of suggestion as it increases its power of transmission, nor is the contrast between describing what is real and describing what is imaginary in the least in point—Valéry has mistakenly used it to represent the contrast between description and something else—between language used in order to convey what is intelligible and language used simply in order to evoke a sequence of images. He is right in insisting that it is necessary to understand this contrast in order to appreciate the tendency of modern literature. Elsewhere he puts the matter in a nutshell saying “There is absolutely no question in poetry of one person’s transmitting to another something intelligible that is going on in his mind. It is a question of creating in the latter a state whose expression is precisely and uniquely that which communicates it to him.”² Here again is a mixture of truth and falsehood. The fact that in all poetry there is something more than mere communication of the intelligible is no ground for saying communication of the intelligible never enters into poetry at all : on the other hand it is

¹ Quoted in *Axel’s Castle*, by Edmund Wilson, p. 284.

² Quoted in *Axel’s Castle*.

perfectly true that to exclude that element as far as possible was the aim of the Symbolist school of poets.

How far in practice Symbolist poets have succeeded in fulfilling this aim is a question which will presently arise, and with it the problem of what sort of communication is possible by the means at their disposal. Here it is enough to say that the Symbolist, if he contents himself with "rien que la suggestion," runs the risk of writing for himself alone, and that it is difficult to explain such communication as he achieves without having recourse to some sort of mysticism, and in fact mysticism of one sort or another has been professed by the earliest of the French Symbolists and boldly proclaimed by a recent apologist, M. l'abbé Brémond.

In his break with tradition, the poet who relies upon suggestion makes a sacrifice : he abandons the intellect. In so doing, he loses more than he is perhaps usually aware of. For his sacrifice is not merely a sacrifice of thought ; if that were so it is true that little if anything need be lost, for there is no necessity for thought to enter into the structure of poetry, there is no rule compelling poets to express in their work any thought whatever, and though in the past poets usually have embodied thought in their writings, we have seen that in fact the intrinsic value of the thought in most poetry (though it may be great) is often small or nothing. But with the

disappearance of thought something else disappears. For, though poets need not try to instruct or inform or exercise the intellect of their readers, none the less the beauty and charm of much poetry depends largely upon the very fact that it is the expression of logical thought, of that "*pensée directe, ordonnant les idées*," which Mallarmé renounced ; often enough the very thing that delights us is that a thought, recognizable in other forms, should be presented in just that dress of word and image. We take pleasure in recognizing a relation : the relation between intelligible content and the form in which it displays itself. It is not merely beauty of language or of images that is responsible for this pleasure ; beauty or grandeur of words and images could be appreciated by one who was unable to understand the thought informing them. Our pleasure lies in realizing that a movement or attitude of intellect can be at once so exactly and so richly expressed.

There are no better examples of the effect that can be obtained in poetry by the adjustment of image and of word to thought than those that are to be found in the later poetry of W. B. Yeats, where much beauty is made out of the expression of an intricate philosophy. It is interesting to contrast it in this respect with the same poet's earlier work, written under the influence of the French Symbolists, which he himself describes as " verses that were all picture,

all emotion, all association." *The Tower*, for instance, is difficult poetry, but it rewards those who understand it with a pleasure that is denied the readers of the simpler, more sensuous poems written by Yeats in the Celtic twilight of forty years ago. Not only in difficult literature, but in all literature that has a core of thought, there is scope for this charm.¹ Walter Pater, who speaks of the "hard, logical and quasi-prosaic excellences that [verse] has, or needs," has borne witness to its presence in pastoral poetry: "To find in the poem, amid the flowers, the allusions, the mixed perspectives, of *Lycidas*, for instance, the thought, the logical structure:—how wholesome! how delightful!"²

This charm, this instrument of delight, the poet who relies upon suggestion must be content entirely to forgo; "logical structure" is the very element that he has banished from his work; his images, therefore, cannot give pleasure by the aptitude, the grace, or the richness with which they express it. The sacrifice that he has made may be one worth making; how far it is, it is part of the purpose of

¹ But it is not true that the charm must be present in proportion as thought plays a prominent part in poetry. The opportunity may be abused, and is often notably abused by poets in whose works thought is most in evidence, for instance, in many passages in *Lucretius* and in *Donne*.

² *Essay on Style (Appreciations, p. 2)*. The same pleasure may be extracted from reading prose, for instance by those readers of Sir Thomas Browne who remember that he wrote not merely to display his virtuosity in language, but often to convey practical information.

this book to show. Certainly, the writer who deserts the regions "where the dull brain perplexes and retards" embarks on an interesting adventure, and may be justified in hoping that he will find at least some compensation for the loss of what he has left behind.

§ 2

In a way, when a writer bids goodbye to meaning, he acquires a new freedom: he steps into the apparently limitless field of suggestion. But when he begins to move within that field he soon finds that his steps are circumscribed. Though a wide world of material is newly opened up to him, when he wishes to organize this material in a work of art consisting of words he will find loss to counter-balance what he has gained. To appreciate how much he gains we need only reflect how much of the life of our mind, how much, in particular, of our æsthetic experience, is independent of discursive thought. But against this we must set the obstacles that stand in his way as an artist.

First of all, much of the raw material of experience, innocent of thought, will not accommodate itself to expression, even by the most dexterous Symbolist, in the medium of words: other things—the notes of music, for instance—might express it, or it may be that it can only be lived.

Nor are the writer's difficulties at an end when he has found matter which can be expressed in words. His aim is to make of that expression a work of art without expressing in it the operations of the intellect. And a work of art consisting simply of the verbal rendering of such experience, or of words meant to create such experience in others solely by the means of suggestion, is inevitably restricted to a narrow range of qualities.

To begin with, such a poem (this kind of work is usually in verse) cannot be of any considerable length. Poe and his followers insisted that a long poem was an impossibility ; that poems were short poems, and "long poems" were poems linked together by prose. They insisted on this because they realized how difficult it is to effect movement and transition within a work void of intellectual content—except at the cost of internal unity. In the orthodox poem the movement is a movement of thought, and the various associations are held together by an intelligible unity. The merely suggestive poem either is limited to the record of a single impression or a single mood, or else presents the appearance of a mere agglomeration of images and ideas. In practice the result is that such symbolist poems as are not restricted to a very short compass, either introduce intelligible relations between the ideas that they successively evoke, or

else fall to pieces, and are not recognizable as unities.¹

Chief, however, among the difficulties facing such a writer, is the difficulty of establishing any dependable relation with his readers. Where there is meaning there is something which is fixed, comprehensible, something which is the same, or at least approximately the same, for each intelligent reader. Two readers who have applied themselves to the same mathematical exposition, to the same page of a scientific text book, or to the same section of an Act of Parliament, can be sure that they have experienced something approximately the same, while two persons who have together looked at a sunset or a landscape and let it impress itself upon them cannot. And the Symbolist's poem is like a landscape: it does not owe its unity to a purely intelligent operation, it is not a logical structure, it depends for its effect chiefly upon the associative value of its component elements.² This associative

¹ Hence it is that praise of such a work as Eliot's *Waste Land*, in which, though most of the matter is, indeed, intelligible, many of the transitions are governed purely by the caprice of personal association, is often restricted to praise of individual lines and passages, and its author is chiefly admired by those who are eager at all costs to admire him, as "a master of phrase."

² These are all points of resemblance between the work of the Symbolist and that of the musician or of the painter. But the painter or the musician can fill, as the writer cannot, the void left by the absence of meaning, with something which gives the ear or the eye a pleasure, to create which is a chief aim of their respective arts.

value is so fluctuating, so uncertain, that the Symbolist can never be quite sure what he is giving to his readers, and the problem of communication is for him almost insoluble. He may be driven to the desperate course of writing for himself alone. This question, which is of the first importance, will be dealt with in a later essay.¹

The difficulties involved in creating an artistic unity out of ideas without the mediation of the discursive intellect are well exemplified in the work of Valéry. He strives, admittedly, to create a work of art which when complete shall display an internal unity: "a poem," he says, "is like a heavy weight which the poet has carried to the roof bit by bit—the reader is the passer-by upon whom the weight is dropped all at once and who consequently receives from it in a moment an overwhelming impression, a complete æsthetic effect, such as the poet has never known in composing it."² The poem, then, need not reproduce a single experience, but it gives rise to a single "complete" impression, an effect which it would not achieve were it not felt as a unity. This effect Valéry succeeds in producing sometimes in his shorter poems; in his longer poems the unity either is not apparent (*La Jeune Parque* is a notable example of such failure), or else is achieved at the cost of large concessions to the intellect (such an

¹ *Communication*, see pp. 90 *sqq.* ² Quoted in *Axel's Castle*, p. 80.

effect, so achieved, is produced by *Le Cimetière Marin*). The bulk of strictly Symbolist poetry written by Valéry, or by anyone else, is very small, and this is really a practical confession by the writers of that school that they are exploring a blind alley.

The following are typical of the sketches that can be produced by using language thus :

“ Here is a prison and I am blind. So intimate the childhood call and brumal darkness in the eye. The houses tumble worlds of pain. Waiting before the land of the mothers, the ode dies far away in pity, and so many bodies sorrow for a eucharist.”¹

WET WINDY NIGHT ON A PAVEMENT.²

Light drunkenly reels into shadow
 blurs, slurs uneasily
 slides off the eyeballs
 the segments shatter
 tree-branches cut arclight in ragged
 fluttering wet strips
 the cup of the sky-sign is filled too full
 it slushes wine over
 the street lamps dance a tarantella
 the street-lamps zig-zag down the street
 the street-lamps fly away
 in a wind of lights

¹ *All Things are Mine*, by Theo Rutra, *Transition* 22, p. 35.

² By A. S. J. Tessimond, from *New Signatures*, p. 99.

The form here happens in the main to be grammatical, but the poem is not so much a description of a scene as a record of the state of feeling induced by certain surroundings, set out in a succession of images. It is small wonder that writers have looked for some way of enlarging the field in which the associative method may be employed. And in fact most of those who today desert meaning have found another path. Desiring to write at some length without having recourse to logical structure, and yet without disintegrating the unity of the work, a writer turns his eyes inwards : he seeks to hold his work together by means of the unity of the self whose experience provides him with his material. The movements and transitions in the work are simply the sequence of ideas in the experiencing mind, they are connected by the fact that it is to a single mind that they belong : they form a psychological, not a logical, unity. The writer does not try to put together, by a careful construction such as Valéry describes, a composite whole which will produce on the reader a single effect ; he simply reproduces a part of his own or another's "stream of consciousness." He is not so much concerned to consider what his chosen ideas will suggest to his readers as to let one idea suggest another in his own mind ; the dominant associations are for the most part personal to himself. By this means modern writers have

produced new and exquisite effects.¹ The pleasure of reverie, the beauty of our waking dreams, the strange irrational threads that run below the surface of our consciousness and colour and determine our thoughts and our ideas—these have never, perhaps, been justly appreciated till modern writers determined to exploit them. It is this method that is most familiar to English readers, probably because it, or something like it, is employed in different ways, by such celebrated writers as Proust, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf. Each of these writers have been found “difficult” by many readers. Precisely what sort of “difficulty” attaches to this kind of writing will be discussed in a later essay. It is clear enough that the writer of this school is in much the same dilemma as that which confronts the strict Symbolist. The sequence of our ideas over a space of time, in so far as it is not directed by our reason, is at the mercy of the associations attaching to the ideas in our minds, and of whatever happen to be our surroundings at the moment. There is a certain community of association between different minds, and it is on the fact of this community that the Symbolist must rely if he is

¹ Mrs. Woolf has in her novels used this method with more success than any other contemporary English writer, and has produced what is perhaps the purest example of it in *The Mark on the Wall*, a piece of pure reverie, and her first experiment in what has become her characteristic manner.

to establish communication with his readers. But a very large proportion of the associations which cluster round our ideas are personal to ourselves, and utterly unknown and unknowable to other people. Sometimes, perhaps through knowledge of our own past experience, we understand why certain ideas belong to and create for us a certain atmosphere, and why they should bring with them certain other ideas with which they are not logically connected ; often this is a mystery even to ourselves, and to those who know neither our inner selves nor our circumstances such sequences of ideas must be utterly inexplicable.¹

We need only try to recall what passed through our mind when we last walked the length of a city street or a country lane for it to become plain to us how unaccountable is the array of ideas that presents itself on such occasions, how difficult it is to distinguish its component elements, how small a part in determining them is played by our intellect, and how inexplicable their sequence would seem to anyone unacquainted with our surroundings at the time and

¹ Knowledge of us or our circumstances might reveal to them why the sequence was what it was, but it could never make the sequence itself an intelligible thing except in so far as its course was determined by our reason. To understand why an author says something is not to understand what he says, and merely to point out the associations which have determined the sequence of images in a symbolist poem does not make that poem an intelligible piece of writing.

with numberless unrecorded experiences that went to the making of our past.

Such passages of dreaming—for it can hardly be called thought¹—may provide us with a deep and constant pleasure. It is not often that this pleasure can be shared with others : the feelings of which it consists are often hardly communicable, and for their communication words are not efficient instruments. By selecting a few ideas with a fairly constant evocative value the Symbolist may try to give others such pleasure by his writing ; by a careful reproduction of such a train of ideas other writers seek to interest us in their own semi-conscious experience. From this experience a selection must be made, for it is impossible in practice to present a full record of all that passed through a mind over more than a very short space of time—the attempt that most nearly achieves this is probably Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is not always easy to see what has guided these writers in choosing between what they shall reject and what they shall retain : sometimes they seem concerned to present a sequence of ideas,

¹ I mean not to deny the possibility of unconscious thought—there clearly is such a thing—but to insist on the distinction between communicating thought, conscious or unconscious, and communicating the results of a process in which the reason plays no part, and the results of which are consequently inaccessible to the reason. *Æ*'s recent book on the sources of his inspiration, *Song and its Fountains*, shows that a poem may reach the surface of its author's consciousness as a complete intelligible whole, employing a prolonged and intricate process of meditation of which he knew nothing.

that shall be somehow beautiful in itself, sometimes they aim at a sort of relevance, not to a meaning but to a mood. In the novel, the method can more easily justify itself. For the novelist acts as a show-man to his characters: he can describe their experiences and their surroundings, and provide a key to the associative workings of their minds. Their psychological fantasies can be subjected to and play their part in a larger and intelligible plan. This is Mrs. Woolf's method, and she uses it to perfection; in Joyce's *Ulysses* the psychological element is unwieldy, it sprawls over and obscures the framework of the book till the reader is at times tempted to doubt whether there is any intelligible structure there at all.¹ The poet has not the advantage of the novelist: he speaks his own mind directly to the reader, and if reason does not govern those of its workings which he chooses to transcribe, the result to the reader may be nothing but bewilderment, or at best the vague apprehension of a mood. A good example of such a poem is Mr. Eliot's *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*. Clearly the reader is being shown

¹ The artistic value of such psychological diaries is a topic outside the scope of this essay, but Mr. Desmond MacCarthy's description of Joyce's efforts (*Criticism* 1932, p. 170) is not out of place here: "And, last of all, the attempt (endless and hopeless in its very nature) to reproduce in print the very texture of consciousness leads Mr. James Joyce to record, in page after page, the jabberings—I cannot call them sub-human, but they are certainly sub-rational—of the idiot or flat-headed savage who talks unheard in the backward abyss of our minds, and sometimes screams audibly in delirium."

ideas that passed through a single mind over a period of some hours ; he is not admitted to a complete view, but to a few chosen glimpses ; clearly no canon of intelligibility has guided the selection, and no single structure of thought emerges :

“ The memory throws up high and dry
 A crowd of twisted things ;
 A twisted branch upon the beach
 Eaten smooth, and polished
 As if the world gave up
 The secret of its skeleton,
 Stiff and white.
 A broken spring in a factory yard,
 Rust that clings to the form that strength has left
 Hard and curled and ready to snap.
 Half-past two,
 The street-lamp said,
 ‘ Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter,
 Slips out its tongue
 And devours a morsel of rancid butter.’
 So the hand of the child, automatic,
 Slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running
 along the quay.
 I could see nothing behind that child’s eye.
 I have seen eyes in the street
 Trying to peer through lighted shutters,
 And a crab one afternoon in a pool,
 An old crab with barnacles on his back,
 Gripped the end of a stick which I held him.
 Half-past three . . . ”

questions to Stetson, why he should record his having done so at this point in the poem, what, supposing he did so, Stetson can have made of them—these are questions which it is impossible to answer, nor is it any help to the reader to know that one line is written in recollection of Webster and another in recollection of Baudelaire. We are left simply with the fact that to Mr. Eliot, with his peculiar sensibility and his peculiar range of reading, there presented itself this series of ideas, or a series from which (for a reason which the selection does not itself make apparent) he chose to preserve these specimens.¹

It is not, of course, only from such dependence upon a recorded sequence of associated ideas, or from the fact that the sequence is largely determined by associations purely personal, that the difficulty of

¹ "Interpretation" even of a poem so full of meaning as *The Waste Land*, often cannot, it seems, amount to more than the pointing out of purely suggestive links—cf. Mr. H. R. Williamson's analysis of *The Waste Land* (*The Poetry of T. S. Eliot*, pp. 106 sqq.): "After the burial of the dead comes the refusal of life . . . The opening lines directly connect [woman] with Cleopatra . . . And the reminiscence of Cleopatra brings to mind the great whore" . . . an association enforced by [the next few lines]—Then a few lines further, a mention of "the laquearia recalls the *Æneid*" (my italics). Compare with this Mr. Leavis's (*New Bearings*, pp. 108 sqq.): "The next transition is a contrast and a comment . . . And there follows an evocation . . . with references confirming the tone that intimates that this is an agony of the soul"; "Madame Sosostris follows; she brings in the demi-monde . . . and introduces the Tarot pack"; "The portentousness of the 'dead sound on the final stroke of nine' serves as a transition, and the unreality of the City turns into a nightmare."

Mr. Eliot's poetry arises. But both are characteristic features of his work, and in them his work admirably illustrates what is perhaps the most important of the substitutes for the intelligible that are offered to the reader of modern literature.

III

INCOHERENCE

Others to some poor meaning make pretence . . .

DRYDEN.

. . . He, who now to sense, now nonsense leaning,
Means not, but blunders round about a meaning . . .

POPE.

It is rare even today to find English poetry in which there is no trace of any meaning. Contemporary writers have not in this respect been completely faithful to the doctrines preached by their forerunners in France. This is partly because their aims are different. It was the professed purpose of Mallarmé and his followers to reduce poetry to the state of music by excluding from it entirely the intelligible element. They wished to banish meaning in submission to the dictates of a rigorous art. The dominant aim of poets today, on the other hand, seems to be to bring poetry "close to life," and there is no reason *a priori* why they should exclude meaning from it altogether ; thought has a part to play even in a "modern consciousness." So it is that poems that consist of a mere mosaic of ideas, or of a sequence of images with no trace of any connection of thought, are rarely nowadays to be met with. Usually the forms of grammar are observed (indeed it is difficult

to abandon them, even if we are trying to talk nonsense), and gleams of sense appear and reappear in an unintelligible setting.¹ Those who seek a meaning are not met with complete unintelligibility, but with incoherence. The writer, though he has a process of thought at the back, so to speak, of his mind, allows association to interfere at two stages—both in determining the images by which he chooses to illustrate his thought, and in determining the connections between its various elements. He has not, in theory, abandoned meaning, but has allowed himself such freedom in the use he makes of association that his work is, in practice, impossible to understand.

Such poems perplex the reader, and he may well be all the more perplexed because they are in some ways so surprisingly like sense ; he does not feel when he reads them quite what he feels when he is faced by a clearly irrational mosaic of ideas or series of images whose sequence is governed obviously by nothing but the associations which existed in the writer's mind. Such passages offer obvious invitations to the intellect : grammar, syntax, idiom,

¹ The reader's task is made no easier by the fact that the thought that is admitted into contemporary verse is often itself very difficult to follow. Such difficulties are often due to the influence of the metaphysical poets on writers of today. So it comes to pass that modern poetry is often characterized by two of the kinds of difficulty described in Ch. IV. below—purely intellectual difficulty and the obscurity of the entirely unintelligible.

structure, all are such as we should expect them to be were the poem meant as an expression of coherent thought. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine why a writer should use forms unless to express coherent thought were at least a part of his aim. Why should he observe the rules of grammar and of syntax, why should he preserve throughout the narrative sequence, the logical structure, if not to communicate a single coherent meaning? The surmise is often confirmed by patches of sense which are to be found embedded in the incoherent mass. Yet, having been led thus far, the mind recoils; enticed by the familiar clues, it finds itself in a strange country, among alien material.

Miss Edith Sitwell's work, particularly, is fruitful of such perplexities :

“ And there in the black and furry boughs
How slowly, coldly, old Time grows,
Where the pigeons smelling of gingerbread,
And the spectacled owls so deeply read,
And the sweet ring-doves of curdled milk,
Watch the Infanta's gown of silk . . . ”

Or again :

Near the mystic boorish
Fustian Moorish,
Castle wall of the ultimate shade,
With his cloak castellated as that wall, afraid,
The mountebank doctor,

The old stage quack,
Where decoy duck dust
Began to clack,
Watched Heliogabaluscue the bat
In his furred cloak hang headlong down from the flat
Wall, cling to what is convenient . . .

The narrative form in both these examples is straightforward ; a simple story is apparently being told ; difficulty arises only when we ask what the story is about. The objects of the thought, but not its movements, are wrapped in mystery, and that mystery seems to be due to the recondite associations that exist in Miss Sitwell's mind. How recondite those associations are she makes very clear in her choice of similes ; for instance

“ The stars were like prunes . . .
Wrinkled, the winter breeze ”

and

“ The currants moonlit as Mother Bunch
In their thick-bushed leaves were laughing like
Punch . . . ”

In these examples the associated ideas are given frankly as similes side by side with the idea that recalled them, so that we are told, and do not have to guess, the real object of the thought. But even if the association is expressed as a simile, the effect is very much the same as if it were given unexplained:

we may be helped to understanding the whole, we are no nearer to seeing why that simile was chosen.¹ "The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls" wrote Tennyson, and no justifying "as it were" was needed, the image satisfies immediately; "The stars were like prunes" writes Miss Sitwell, and we are left wondering why.

When a reader comes upon the following in Joyce :

"We are Waste not with Want, precondamned, two and
true,
Till Nolands go volants and Bruneyes come blue.
Ere those gidflirts now gadding you quit your mocks for
my gropes,
An extense must impull and elapse must elopes,
Of my tectucs takestock, tinktact, and ail's weel;
As I view by your farlook hale yourself to my heal,
Partiprise my thinwhins while my blink points unbroken
on
Your whole 's whereabroads with Tout's tightyright
token on." ²

he must feel even farther from comprehension than when he reads that

¹ It is hard to differentiate between these and the following "admirable images" which have evoked the admiration of M. Eluard, the *surréaliste* (*This Quarter*, Sept. 1932, p. 145): "Doubt's duck with vermouth lips" (Lautréamont), "The stunted clay of mimes" (Tzara), "The lary suns which fed on meningitis" (Char), "Flowers that are chairs" (Rimbaud).

² From "From Three Fragments from 'Work in Progress'" *Imagist Anthology*, 1930, p. 121.

“ ’Twas brillig and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe ;
All mimsy were the borogroves
And the mome raths outgrabe.”

In either case there is the same alluring general appearance of sense, which proves illusory at the first attempt to discover what the poem is about. In either case we despair of discovering the meaning (though we may keep our faith that there is a meaning behind the words) until the author provides us with his private key. In the second example, the author does provide the key, and we find that our difficulties are due largely to a play on words, which governs his choice of language. In the first example also a play on words seems responsible for some part of the difficulty, but far more largely a play upon ideas. One word, one idea takes the place of another, at the author's inexplicable whim. Sometimes we can follow, dimly, the movement of his caprice ; almost always we are completely in the dark. While the Symbolist seems to have discarded meaning in its proper sense and retained it only in so far as his words stand for something recognizable, these writers seem to use words without any intelligible reference, and yet to be trying to convey, by this impossible medium, an intelligible meaning. Until we have substituted in each case the original for the associated image, we

cannot appreciate the intelligible structure on which the piece is apparently composed.¹

Even then, it is not certain that such a poem will be completely intelligible. For association is often allowed so free a rein that it seems to have interfered with the course of the thought, with the whole theme and purpose of the discourse, and not to have been confined to influencing the choice of images by which an author set out to make plain a single coherent theme—with the result that the poem has something in common with the poems that simply record the stream of consciousness. Once association is made dominant in the choice of component ideas, there is a risk that it will play havoc with the structure of the thought itself. The component sentences may be, by themselves, intelligible, but they seem not to express the single movement of a mind. Even a painstaking, and in a large degree orthodox, writer like Miss Sitwell is sometimes swept, so to speak, off her feet by her associations, so that we cease merely being uncertain what she is writing about, and begin to wonder what is the whole purpose of her discourse. We are inclined to ask this about her in *Four in the Morning*, which begins :

¹ It is interesting to be told that some at least of Joyce's work is composed by a converse method : the writer starting with a straightforward logical structure, which he then alters and breaks up by substituting and inserting ideas suggested by associations existing in his own mind or supposed to exist in the minds of his characters.

“ Cried the navy-blue ghost
Of Mr. Belaker
The allegro negro cocktail-shaker,
‘ Why did the cock crow,
Why am I lost,
Down the endless road to Infinity toss’d ?
The tropical leaves are whispering white
As water ; I race the wind in my flight.
The white lace houses are carried away
By the tide ; far out they float and sway.
White is the nursemaid on the parade.
Is she real, as she flirts with one unafraid ?
Such honeyed imbecility lies
In the eternal July skies
As in her giggling curls. In swirls
The houses fade and drop in pearls.
Traced through the leaves as white as water . . .
Ghostly, flowed over the nursemaid, caught her,
Left her . . . ’ ”

In certain phrases—the navy-blue ghost, the leaves whispering white as water, and the guinea-fowl plumaged houses (which make their appearance a line or two further on)—we recognize idiosyncrasies of the familiar sort : these things come naturally to Miss Sitwell, and it pleases her to say them, just as it came naturally to the White Queen to say that the wind was “ as strong as soup.” They are the result of personal associations which, if kept within reasonable bounds, will not obscure completely the poet’s

meaning, if it is the poet's intention to convey a meaning. But here it is impossible not to wonder whether there is a meaning, whether association has not carried the author outside the field of the intelligible—whether the poem is not to be taken simply as an early morning fantasia composed on the lines of Mr. Eliot's *Soliloquy on a Windy Night*.¹

Here, from a younger poet,² is another example of a poem which seems to fall between two stools, with that bewildering mixture of sense and nonsense which characterizes dreams and day-dreams :

For what as easy
For what though small
For what is well
Because between

¹ I notice (after writing the text above) that Mr. Robert Graves, in his *Poetic Unreason*, p. 135-6, quotes a very similar poem of Miss Sitwell's (*Façade*, No. 27) as an example of how, as he says, "Poetic metamorphosis is carried one stage further from the understanding of the Victorian critic when the grammatical construction is continually being interrupted by fresh images before the others have submitted themselves for logical classification." I take it that the comment he wishes to make is substantially the same as mine. He adds that he has himself "often been aware, on waking from dreams, of having been thinking in the mode exemplified" in the poem, and suggests that this confirms his right to call it intelligible. Throughout his book he is concerned to show, and does so with ingenuity and force, that "associative" writing corresponds to that which goes on in (or rather "beneath" or "behind") our minds, in dreaming, and that the springs of poetry are often to be found in the unconscious. So far as I know, this has never been denied. What it is necessary to remember is that the distinction between what is thought and what is not is maintained even below the level of consciousness (*v. supra* note on p. 45).

² W. H. Auden "Poem" in *New Signatures*, p. 32.

To you simply
From me I mean
Who goes with who
The bedclothes say
And I and You
Go kissed away
The data given
The senses even
Fate is not late
Nor the ghost houseless
Nor the speech rewritten
Nor the tongue listless
Nor the word forgotten
Said at the start
About heart
By heart for heart

This, whatever it is, is not a mere procession of images or even of complete but disjointed thoughts ; a mind seems to be playing hide-and-seek with the reader among the phrases that compose it, but the key to its hiding-place is in the author's pocket, and so long as it remains there appreciation of the poem is a matter simply of personal loyalty to the author.

Such work shows how writers, when they try to exploit association, may fail to distinguish between purely personal associations and those which are recognizable by the common reader, and how they are not invariably consistent in the purpose for which they exploit either sort of association within

a single work of art. At one moment a writer seems to have some thought to tell us ; at another he seems eager only to create, by his collocation of words, a pattern of images in our minds ; at another he is engaged only in transcribing the passage of images through his consciousness ; at another, to be concealing a meaning behind a series of images which he associates, but we do not, with the things that his thought conceives. More often, modern poets do not seem to be aware in which of these operations they are engaged. Even when the whole poem seems to be articulated by thought, the skeleton is as often as not hidden in a welter of associations, now personal, now universal, which seem to be indulged in with no consistent purpose. What, for instance, can have determined the sequence of images in the following poem by Richard Aldington ?

“ They say the lion and
but here lizards life-flashes
Over stormy rocks why
do the english hate life
but so does raucous italy
fingering cento lire
but
that oleander mouth is
diverse spirit wavering
in
the inner fire consumes
and life renews ”

If we were to substitute here something related in Mr. Aldington's mind to that of which he ostensibly is speaking, should we find in this an intelligible whole? Or is it absolutely without meaning? And if so, is it a poem constructed in the Symbolist manner, or is it the record of a train of Mr. Aldington's personal reflections, started, perhaps, by a memory of Omar Khayyam? Whichever of these is the true explanation, private associations have been allowed so much play that the ordinary reader is effectively prevented from appreciating it.

We must exhaust the resources of sympathy and intelligence before we condemn a poem on the ground that the associations employed in it are purely "private." Lack of either may lead to the doing of an injustice—such an injustice as was done to Wordsworth by the reviewer who wrote "When a man endeavours to make his reader enter into an association that exists in his own mind between daffodils waving in the wind, and laughter—or to teach him to see something very fine in the fancy of crowning a little rock with snow-drops, he fails, and is sure to fail; for it would be strange indeed if anyone besides himself ever formed an association, so capricious and entirely arbitrary."¹ In this

¹ Review of *Poems in Two Volumes*, in *The Annual Review*, 1807. Quoted in *An Estimate of Wordsworth by his Contemporaries* by Elsie Smith, 1932.

instance, the reviewer is wrong, and we have only to walk into a wood to prove it. The association between daffodils and laughter is not capricious and arbitrary : it is an association (as many even of Wordsworth's contemporaries realized) which is easily formed and easily appreciated by any person with the slightest glimmering of imagination. We hardly use a sentence which does not contain a metaphor, and to employ metaphor is to substitute one idea for another in a way which can only be justified by an appeal to associations that are somehow common to both. To extend the range of recognizable associations (and thus of metaphor) is to do a valuable service to literature, though it often brings obloquy to those who lead the way—obloquy from which Wordsworth and Miss Sitwell are fellow-sufferers. Miss Sitwell has done not a little to extend this range and so to open the eyes of her generation to aspects of things and similarities between them to which their predecessors were blind. Those who are unconscious of her achievement will cut a poor figure in the eyes of a world accustomed to see with her wider vision, just as in the realm of painting the attitude of those who poured scorn on the leaders of the Impressionist school seems, to a generation accustomed to see the world as they saw and rendered it, a gross or even a wilful blindness. Their attitude remains a warning against

unwillingness to extend our vision, in literature and in art.

But our willingness must not be over-taxed ; similarities may be discovered, but must not be invented ; the distinction between recognizable and personal associations, between those grounded in common experience and those grounded in accident, must not be overlooked. And when a writer spends most of his time seeking associations which no reader can be expected to recognize and weaving metaphors which no reader can be expected to enjoy, we must assume, particularly if he asks to be understood, either that he is muddle-headed, and is to be pitied like a child who cannot abandon a new toy, or else that he is the victim of vanity and of conceit, and deserves not so much commiseration as rebuke.

Which of the two is here appropriate it is not necessary to decide, but certainly a reviewer might reasonably protest that " When a woman endeavours to make her readers enter into an association that exists in her own mind between pigeons and gingerbread or stars and prunes, she fails and is sure to fail ; for it would be strange indeed if anyone besides herself ever formed associations so capricious and entirely arbitrary," and it is true that such capricious and arbitrary associations can spoil a poem. They may be but blemishes, if they are not outrage-

ous or numerous ; if they are wild and if they are so frequent that no recognizable signposts are left to guide us, they may ruin a piece completely. Completely, because part of the writer's purpose being to convey a meaning, he has sacrificed the possibility of achieving it to something else. And what he gains instead—the free introduction of suggested images—is no real compensation for what he has lost ; we cannot enjoy it uninterruptedly for its own sake, for it has not been indulged in for itself. The drift, the pattern of association which has an independent value in those writings which confessedly have abandoned meaning, are obscured by the vestiges of an intellectual structure, and the effort to discover what it is that he is meant to understand prevents the reader from enjoying the images and ideas as they are presented, just as the random method that governs their choice precludes him from understanding their connection.

The self-contradiction inherent in such writing is in itself enough to make the critic wonder what can be in the minds of those who practise it.

“ The proper scale would pat you on the head
But Alice showed her pup Ulyssês' bough
Well from behind a thistle, rose with dread ;
And though your gulf-sprung mountains I allow
(Snow-puppy curves, rose-solemn dado band)
Charming for nurse, I am not nurse just now.”¹

¹ “ Poem ” in *New Signatures*, Hogarth Press, 1922, p. 67.

So sings Mr. Empson of Cambridge, and his sponsor assures us that he "is definitely trying to say something to an audience."¹ This much the form suggests: the word "though" is itself enough to put the reader on the alert for a meaning. Further, we are told that, though the poem is obscure, "its obscurity is due solely to a necessary compression, not to any use of accidental association . . . In Mr. Empson's poetry there is no scope for vagueness of interpretation, and its 'difficulty' arises from this merit." But why is the compression "necessary"? And is the obscurity due entirely to compression? To what can we owe the line "snow-puppy curves, rose-solemn dado band" but to "accidental association"—and an association of the very sort at which Wordsworth's critic believed himself to be aiming when he wrote "it would be strange indeed if anyone besides himself ever formed [an] association, so capricious and entirely arbitrary"? It is hardly possible to enjoy for its own sake (as one might with a line of Swinburne) the collection of images called up by the words that the line contains; the line (linked to its context, apparently, only by the literary allusion repeated from a previous line) if treated thus could at best be only an uncomfortable parenthesis in the middle of what we are assured is a close intellectual sequence; and we are expressly warned

¹ *New Signatures*, p. 12.

that there is here "no scope for vagueness of interpretation." Mr. Empson's poem well illustrates the dangers of the middle course—the imagery does not illuminate, it obscures, the skeleton of thought : the presence of that skeleton prevents us from looking at the poem as a mere pageant of images.

One of the most famous of modern English poems, *The Waste Land*, suffers on a larger scale from this confusion of methods, this mixture of what can be understood, easily or with difficulty, and what cannot be understood at all ; critics disagree not only on the question how it should be interpreted, but on the question whether any interpretation of it is possible. Eager though they are to offer us a complete explanation of the poem's intellectual content, they can give us no rational account of many of the bewildering transitions that are perhaps its most striking feature,¹ and they are not agreed as to the part played by the ideas thus arbitrarily connected. "*The Waste Land*," says Mr. Williamson,² "is a poetic cryptogram. The incantatory value of the poetry is not nullified by ignorance of the 'solution,' though knowledge of that too is necessary for complete enjoyment." He then quotes Mr. I. A. Richards, who frankly calls Mr. Eliot's poetry a "music of ideas," in which the ideas "like the

¹ See the various accounts quoted above, p. 49.

² *The Poetry of T. S. Eliot*, p. 81.

musician's phrases . . . are arranged, not that they may tell us something, but that their effects on us may combine into a coherent whole of feeling." Mr. Leavis¹ comes nearest to giving an explicit statement when he says of *The Waste Land* that "the unity the poem aims at is that of an inclusive consciousness: the organization it achieves as a work of art is of the kind that . . . may, by analogy, be called musical." Miss Dilys Powell² expresses the matter a little differently: "Mr. Eliot, encouraged by his own theory, makes a point of concentrating ideas and images and phrases even less apparently related than Spinoza and the typewriter . . . Should the fusion be incomplete, should 'Apeneck Sweeney' and Agamemnon, Grishkin and the Abstract Entities evade their new relationship, the poem must fall into unintelligible fragments."³

In part, it seems, Mr. Eliot is putting together ideas not in order to "tell us something" but in

¹ *New Bearings*, p. 103.

² *Life and Letters*, VII, 43, p. 405.

³ Mrs. G. R. Mitchison (in *The Week-End Review*, Oct. 15th, 1932) contributes a new element to the analysis: "Today," she writes, "*The Waste Land* seems a clear and definite statement of a muddle and the beginnings of making it into a pattern: not a static pattern, of course, but the moving pattern of a dance." Mr. R. L. Mégroz (*Modern English Poetry*, p. 202) is sensibly content with a description: "The disjointed sequences of ideas on the surface, and at constant reunion of such sequences, much as melodic themes in a fugue, separate, die out, return and reunite, is an extreme development of the literary imitation of simultaneity, a 'sort of bird's-eye view of the contents of the mind at a given moment.'" 

accordance with a scheme to which music affords the only analogy ; in part, he is constructing a difficult, but intelligible, "cryptogram" ; in part, he is recording a flow of "ideas, images and phrases" through a "consciousness" ; and the associations that determine this flow are at times clearly personal to himself, though in the main we are told that his endeavour is to create an "inclusive consciousness," that is to say, presumably, an imaginary consciousness in which the dominant associations are those common to most of the poet's contemporaries, and to those who share his range of thought and feeling, that is, to most of the maturely and the prematurely middle-aged.

This is no criticism of *The Waste Land* as poetry, but it goes to show that, on the evidence of some of its most intelligent admirers, there is some confusion of principles in its construction, a confusion of which neither the author nor his readers seem to be very clearly aware. No single poem of recent years has had more influence on young writers than *The Waste Land*, and one of the most important results of its influence has been that very many modern writers confuse the functions of thought and association ¹ in

¹ For instance, Mrs. G. R. Mitchison recommends the public to read Mr. Auden's *The Orators* "as passively as possible, just as a body sensitised to words, without letting intellect interfere" ; and in almost the same breath speaks of her disagreement with "the political implications all through the book" (*The Week-End Review*,

literature with little consideration of the underlying issues and with a most unfortunate effect upon their work.

May 28, 1932) ; and Mr. Ezra Pound (*This Quarter*, Sept. 1932, p. ix) in his praise of the work of Cheever Dunning, whom he declares to be "one of the four or five poets of our time," observes that his "verse in this volume (Dunning's *Windfalls*) appears to have passed through thought and re-entered the domain of instinct." Neither writer can really have thought what he or she was saying.

I V

O B S C U R I T Y

True No-meaning puzzles more than wit.—POPE.

If there's no meaning in it that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any.—LEWIS CARROLL.

WHENEVER, IN speech or writing, we try unsuccessfully to communicate our meaning to others, our failure may be due to one or more of several causes, and those possible causes are of two main kinds. On the one hand the cause may be the laziness or inattention of our listener or reader, or his ignorance of the subject that we are discussing or of the technical terms in which we are trying to explain it ; it may be, on the other hand, that our thought is difficult to follow, or that we express it ill.

Remembering this, when we call what we read "obscure," we ought first to ask ourselves whether our trouble does not arise from our own lack of alertness or of knowledge. Much of the criticism levelled at modern poetry on the ground that it is obscure is due simply to the impatience of those who have been brought up to believe that poetry should not demand from its readers any special knowledge or alertness. This was a belief which was popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, but is rejected by many poets in the twentieth, as it was by many poets in the seventeenth century. Poets now, as then, demand from their readers not merely a receptive attitude, a readiness to appreciate what is put before them ; they ask, also, close attention and a certain degree of familiarity with special fields of knowledge.¹

This is not all. Like their seventeenth-century predecessors, they expect their audience to be intelligent as well as appreciative. Much of their work is difficult in (so to speak) its own right, not merely perplexing to those who are ignorant, or disinclined to make an effort to understand it : for its obscurity, the writer, not the reader, is responsible.

Certain qualities make a process of thought difficult to follow—abstractness, for instance, and elusiveness in the component ideas, intricacy and incongruity in their connection—and poetry so qualified may be said to be intrinsically difficult. “Metaphysical” poetry is difficult just in this way : with the best will and the closest attention in the world, stupid people are unable to appreciate it ; this is what people mean when they call Donne a difficult author, and they are right to do so.

¹ Time reduces much simple literature to this condition : words become antiquated and subjects obscure, and topical allusions impossible to understand. Therefore, old writers come to require of later readers an attention and a knowledge which they did not demand of their contemporaries.

A writer may be responsible in a different way for obscurity in his work. His thought may concern familiar topics, and itself be easy to follow, and his language may be the language of every day, yet his words may be chosen so that they ill express his thought, and his work will in consequence be difficult to understand. Ellipsis is probably the fault of expression which most frequently, and most seriously, impedes the understanding of literature ; sometimes, also, a writer who has not perfectly mastered his medium is led to use strange or inadequate forms of speech by the limitations imposed on him by rhyme or metre ; sometimes his oddity of expression simply reproduces an oddity of his own mind.

Finally, by the use of symbols, a writer may make his work systematically obscure. The degree of difficulty with which this means of expression invests a work of art depends upon how complete a key to his system of symbols is available.

In all the examples so far given, obscurity implies intelligibility ; when we say that the work is difficult we are saying that its meaning is hard, but presupposing that it is possible, to find. It is only within the realm of meaning that difficulty can exist ; the obscurity of literature which has discarded meaning is of a different kind from that which may trouble those who are trying to understand the intelligible. Of much modern literature it may

truly be said that it is not difficult, not because it is easy, but because it is impossible, to understand. Often its readers are perplexed simply because they are looking for something—a meaning—which is not there ; they are trying to bridge by thought a gulf which the mind cannot cross. Exactly what this gulf is, and how it is possible to bridge it, is the crucial question in a discussion of this kind of writing ; whatever may be the answer, it is clear that such writing is not “difficult” in the same sense as writing of an orthodox kind.

This essay is an attempt to make clear the difference between these several kinds of obscurity.

Which kind of difficulty is caused by “symbolical” writing depends upon the sense in which that ambiguous word is used. When symbolism is used as a method of conveying meaning, its difficulties are of the intellectual kind. Such difficulties cannot always be solved simply by reflecting on the work itself (which is the only way of solving difficulties that are inherent in the thought) ; sometimes, where the symbols do not explain themselves, we are dependent upon the writer’s supplying us with a key ; but the key is none the less a key to meaning, its use is an intellectual operation, and the mind, when it tackles such a piece of writing, is faced with something difficult, but not outside its range.

Much of the obscurity of French Symbolist writing, on the other hand, and of the English literature which is in that tradition, is not due to any intellectual difficulty : the part which the intelligence has to play in appreciating it is usually simple enough ; to think it " difficult " in the sense in which that word is applied to writing which has an intelligible content is the result of entirely misconceiving its nature, of trying to understand what should be merely felt—as if a man should complain that he cannot make sense of the pattern upon a carpet.

Unfortunately, modern writing (partly because modern writers have not always a clear idea of what it is that they are trying to do) does not all fall into one or other of these two classes : much of it is hybrid, and alternately tempts and frustrates the mind by setting up impossible obstacles—imported from the region of pure association—in a road which is otherwise accessible to the understanding.

The contrast between poetry which is intellectually difficult and poetry to which that term has no application can best be brought out by examples. The " metaphysical " school provides abundant examples of difficulty of the intellectual sort. Take the following stanzas from Donne :

But I am by her death, (which word wrongs her)
Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown ;
Were I a man, that I were one,

I needs must know ; I should preferre,
If I were any beast,
Some ends, some means ; Yea plants, yea stones
detest,
And love ; All, all some properties invest.
If I an ordinary nothing were,
As shadow, a light, and body must be here.

and the following from *The Primrose* :

Live Primrose then, and thrive
With thy true number five ;
And women, whom this flower doth represent,
With this mysterious number be content ;
Ten is the farthest number ; if halfe ten
Belonge unto each woman, then
Each woman may take halfe us men,
Or if this will not serve their turne, Since all
Numbers are odde, or even, since they fall
First into this, five, women may take us all.

The perplexity of the ordinary reader, when faced with these lines, is due first of all to his ignorance : he cannot follow the thought because he cannot grasp its terms : he has not Donne's special knowledge of the mysteries of nothingness and of numbers. When that is acquired—and a note will supply all that is necessary for the occasion—the lines remain obscure, for the connection of the ideas is intricate, odd, paradoxical. It is this which constitutes the characteristic difficulty of Donne, and it is an ex-

cellent example of what is meant by calling poetry intellectually difficult. Towards the understanding of such lines a paraphrase will help, but the only way of being sure to grasp their meaning is to read and re-read them, to think and think again.

All intellectual difficulties cannot be solved simply by thinking : knowledge, as well as reflection, is necessary (as in these examples from Donne), and sometimes it is only lack of knowledge that prevents us from understanding a poem at the first reading. This is true of many poems which employ symbols, not as the French Symbolists used them, but as vehicles of meaning. Ignorance of the symbols prevents us from grasping the meaning, and mere thought will not remedy that ignorance. The obstacle in such cases is an intellectual one—it is in the way of understanding, and it is removed by fresh knowledge of fact—but it is, perhaps, misleading to call such poems difficult : they are impossible until knowledge makes them easy. An early poem of W. B. Yeats provides a good example of the sort of difficulty which may be caused by the use of an unfamiliar set of symbols :

Do you not hear me calling, white deer with no horns !
I have been changed to a hound with one red ear ;
I have been in the Path of Stones and the Wood of
Thorns,
For somebody hid hatred and hope and desire and fear

Under my feet that they follow you night and day.
A man with a hazel wand came without sound ;
He changed me suddenly ; I was looking another way ;
And now my calling is but the calling of a hound ;
And Time and Birth and Change are hurrying by.
I would that the Boar without bristles had come from
the West
And had rooted the sun and moon and stars out of the
sky
And lay in the darkness, grunting, and turning to his
rest.

The obscurity of this poem is obscurity of a very simple kind : it is like a riddle, which is inexplicable till you are told the answer ; to those who know nothing of Arthurian and Gaelic legend, its meaning is impossible to unravel ; on the other hand, it tells a simple story to those who know even the little which its author, in his note, reveals of the origin of the symbols employed in it : " This hound and this deer (found in a ' last century Gaelic poem ') seem plain images of the desire of man ' which is for the woman,' and ' the desire of the woman which is for the desire of the man,' and of all desires that are as these. . . . The man in my poem who has a hazel wand may have been Aengus, Master of Love ; and I have made the boar without bristles come out of the West, because the place of sunset was in Ireland, as in other countries, a place of symbolic darkness and death." This may not be a complete explanation

of the poem's meaning, chiefly because the symbols themselves are not fully explained ; but the lines on which it is given and the light which it throws show clearly enough the nature of the difficulty that confronts one at a first reading.

The author has here adapted freely a stock of symbols which he found already in existence ; apart from these adaptations the key to the poem is in the hands of anyone who knows the source of the symbols and their conventional significance ; it is an obscure poem only to those to whom the key has not been given.

In his later poems, where he discards the conventional Gaelic system of symbols for others of his own making, Yeats increases the difficulties of the uninitiate, but the difference is one of degree only, and not of kind. " They take their place," says the author, writing of a series of poems in his later work, and the characters, half-imaginary, which occur in them, " in a phantasmagoria in which I endeavour to explain my philosophy of life and death, and till that philosophy has found some detailed exposition in prose certain passages in the poems . . . may seem obscure." The difficulty of Yeats' later poetry is in part due to the unexplained symbols which it contains ; largely it is difficult because it expresses in strict verse and austere language a philosophy at once mystical and highly intellectual. The latter

difficulty is inherent in the thought ; to solve it we must reflect closely upon the matter itself ; the former is none the less an intellectual difficulty because it arises through our imperfect knowledge of the symbols used, and cannot be solved simply by thinking about them, and about them alone.

Blake is another poet much of whose work is practically unintelligible to those who have not the key to the complicated symbolic system which is displayed in it. Nor is the key easy to find. Yet it is, or should not be, beyond the reach of the man who will spend the time and trouble to study Blake's works minutely, for it is a system, Blake meant it to be consistent, and to express a meaning.

Some poems are hard to understand for a reason very similar, but not quite the same ; the key lies in recognizing not a system of symbols, but the essentials of the situation presupposed. To one who is ignorant of this, a perfectly straightforward poem may seem the sheerest nonsense. Some of Rimbaud's work, for instance, is not, though it may seem, an extreme example of Symbolism's abandonment of intelligible structure, but consists of sketches of his own circumstances and feelings which are easily understood by one who knows the details of his life. He may not always make the references plain, even to those who are familiar with his biography, and the proper interpretation of some will remain for ever

uncertain ; but the principle upon which these, too, are written is the same : they are like riddles or enigmas—nonsense until you know the answer, but, in the light of that knowledge, as clear as day.

Midway between ordinary intellectual difficulty and the obscurity which it is entirely beyond the power of thought to penetrate lie the perplexities involved in the work of those writers who have chosen what may be called the middle course. A writer may have a meaning to express, and yet make it impossible for a reader, by exercising intelligence or by consulting books, to understand that meaning, because the ideas which he uses stand for things in his mind which they do not stand for in anyone else's: his choice is governed, not by any system, but by something which is no better than caprice.

When a writer thus allows purely personal associations to dictate to him his choice of ideas, without reference to any community of association between himself and his readers, he is running a grave risk of writing for himself alone. If Miss Sitwell speaks of "Emily-coloured hands," a reader will be in the dark unless, perhaps, he knows that Miss Sitwell had a nurse named Emily, and knows, further, with what colour the idea of that nurse was associated in Miss Sitwell's mind. And when writers choose to convey ideas in the way in which Miss Sitwell conveys that colour, then, even though they may be trying to

express a meaning, they usually make it impossible for their readers to understand them : mere thought about what is written will never unlock the door.

Much modern writing presents a closed door of this sort, although behind that door it seems that a store of meaning is concealed. Meaning has not necessarily been abandoned for suggestion ; it is there, but suggestion is exploited at its expense. In such work grammatical form is preserved, and a thinking mind seems to direct and inform the material, but we cannot follow the mind's thought because the ideas which express it seem to be chosen by the caprice of associations purely personal, and it is as hard to trace an intelligible connection between them as it would be if the choice were purely fortuitous. Such writing does present what may fairly be called intellectual difficulties, because the mind suspects a meaning and struggles to unveil it. The mind cannot succeed unaided in this task, because it cannot, except by luck, discover clues which are personal to the writer. Authors who completely abandon meaning are usually able to establish a contact of a different sort. The Symbolists, for example, at least attempted to establish a sort of dictionary of association, to use as their symbols ideas which they fancied had something like the same associative value for everybody, or at least for anybody with anything like a similar stock of experience

to their own. The theory lying behind this complete abandonment of meaning, though mistaken, at least offered a hope of getting into touch with a reader in a way impossible to one who has a meaning to express, but when she means "red" says "Emily."

The obscurity of the French Symbolists, and of those English writers who follow them in abandoning meaning altogether, is something quite different from the intellectual difficulty whose various types we have been discussing. In a way, such writing is not difficult at all: its "difficulty" is a misunderstood simplicity. Their work, therefore, cannot be interpreted: there is no room in it for obscurity; to call it "difficult" presupposes a misconception of their aim.

Here is a fair, not an extreme, example of poetry of this kind:

CONCAVA VALLIS

The wire-like bands of colour involute mount from
my fingers;

I have wrapped the wind round your shoulders

And the molten metal of your shoulders

bends into the turn of the wind,

AOI!

The whirling tissue of light

is woven and grows solid beneath us;

The sea-clear sapphire of air, the sea-dark clarity,
stretches both sea-cliff and ocean.¹

¹ Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems*, 1928, p. 142.

In this poem, grammatical construction and a certain descriptive sequence are retained, but the ideas are put together on no intelligible scheme, but simply to record and evoke a congeries of sensations by means of the associations which they arouse in the mind of the reader. And whatever we may think of the result, we must beware of calling it difficult : not because it is easy, but because it is outside the realm of meaning, and it is only within that realm that the mind can move, either with difficulty or with ease.

The same illusory appearance of obscurity invests those poems which desert intelligibility, not in order to make a mosaic of images or thoughts, but to record the procession of ideas through a consciousness at a time when the reason is not in full control. Much of the work of James Joyce and T. S. Eliot which has won for them the reputation of difficult writers consists simply of the record of the stream of images passing through a mind at a time of daydream, when the sequence of ideas is determined by some cause other than the intelligence. They are diaries of the subconscious or the semi-conscious mind. No passage will better serve as an example of such writing than that already quoted from *The Waste Land* :

Half-past two,
The street-lamp said,
“ Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter,
Slips out its tongue

And devours a morsel of rancid butter.”
So the hand of the child, automatic,
Slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running along
the quay.

I could see nothing behind that child's eye.
I have seen eyes in the street
Trying to peer through lighted shutters,
And a crab one afternoon in a pool,
An old crab with barnacles on his back,
Gripped the end of a stick which I held him.

Half-past three . . .

A passage like this is no more an intelligible sequence than is a dream. Like a dream, we should accept it for what it is, suspect no meaning, and ask for no interpretation.

An analogy from another poet may make this clear. In Yeats' *The Cap and Bells*,¹ it is natural to suspect that the author intends a careful allegory, and that, by his jester, his lady, and the incidents concerning them that he describes, he is conveying a lesson which it is his reader's business to discover.

Yeats' note on the poem is as follows : “ I dreamed this story exactly as I have written it, and dreamed another long dream after it, trying to make out its meaning, and whether I was to write it in prose or verse. . . . The poem has always meant a great deal to me, though, as is the way with symbolic poems, it has not always meant quite the same thing.”

¹ *Later Poems*, p. 25.

When the author tells him this, it seems plain that the reader must accept the poem simply for what it is : a verse description of something that its author dreamed. The poet meant to convey in words his vision, and his poem is clear enough if it is taken to be simply that.¹

It is interesting to compare *My Dream*, by Christina Rossetti—an account of an elaborate and lifelike vision of crocodiles, simply told, but with an unspoken suggestion of latent symbolism. That the suggestion is misleading the writer tells us herself in the last three lines of the poem :

What can it mean ? you ask. I answer not
For meaning, but myself must echo, What ?
And tell it as I saw it on the spot.

Why is it that *The Cap and Bells* has “ meant many things ” to Yeats, and that we are tempted to call it

¹ When Yeats says that he tried “ to make out the meaning,” it must be remembered that he believes in external supernatural agencies as responsible, at least in part, for our sleeping visions, and his attempt to find a meaning for his dream may be either an attempt to fit its images into a wider scheme of symbols than was to him habitual, or an attempt to penetrate the external intelligence which inspired him with it. Or it may be that he attempted to find out what the dream portended, or how he came to dream it.

When, on the other hand, Yeats says that the poem has meant many things to him, he is clearly using the word “ meaning ” in a different sense from that which is the subject of this inquiry—not in the sense in which a writer means something by what he says or writes, but in the sense in which what he writes may “ mean ” different things to different people. So this poem, when Yeats, on different occasions and in different circumstances, has reflected on it, has inspired and affected him in different ways, and in this sense has had a fresh “ meaning ” to him on each occasion.

difficult, to search in vain in it for a further meaning? Chiefly, it seems, because the story told in it, its obvious meaning, is simple, and the elements of which it is composed are suggestive; they are so richly suggestive, they so much overburden the simplicity of the story, that the reader is tempted to suppose that the poem is intended to convey a hidden meaning by the use of symbols. We are strongly conscious, as we read, of something beyond the meaning, and we therefore suspect a mysterious or inner meaning, and when our efforts to discover it are apparently confronted with impenetrable symbols, we think the poem obscure. In fact, there is nothing hidden, and therefore there is no obscurity. What is intelligible in the poem is easily understood. It only seems obscure if we try to interpret what we should be content to enjoy.

It is precisely this desire to interpret instead of to feel, to look for a meaning which is not there, that leads the critics to call symbolist poetry obscure. To ask what Mr. Pound or Mr. Eliot meant by writing the poems that have been quoted is as misguided as to ask what Mr. Yeats meant by dreaming of a red garment and a blue. To neither question is there any answer: the only difference is that Mr. Yeats' dream has an intelligible structure, while Mr. Eliot's reflections on a windy night have not: in the first case we look for two meanings where we should

be content with one, in the second for one meaning where we should be content with none at all. Hard, then, though it may be to see why that particular procession of images should have passed through the poet's mind on a windy night, that does not make the passage "difficult." Indeed, *The Waste Land*, as a whole, is a more difficult poem than this, just in so far as it is more intelligible. It is capable (we are told), at least in large parts, of explanation; a careful symbolism runs through it, and it abounds in subtle intellectual references. As with all learned and ingenious and elliptical poets, the elucidation of these things is difficult; it is when Mr. Eliot and his contemporaries abandon a logical for a psychological structure, and when they make play with the associative magic of ideas, that difficulty ceases and, for better or for worse, impossibility begins.

One step further it is possible to go, in the direction of apparent difficulty and actual ease; one step further away from the realm of the intelligible. That step is taken by writers who use words, not as parts of speech to convey a complex of thought, nor yet to convey isolated or fortuitously assembled images and ideas, writers who strip from words the last vestiges of meaning. A reader confronted by such a passage as the following: "Anyhow means furls furls with a chance chance with a change change with as strong strong with as will will with as sign

sign with as west west with as most most with as in in with as by by with as change change with as reason reason to be lest lest they did when when they did not for they did there and their," will ask what can be difficult if that is not. It is obscurer (he will say) than anything written by Eliot or Pound. In a sense he is right. To apply the mind to such a passage is more foolish even than to apply it to a Symbolist poem. At the same time, this passage presents the reader with the easier material. Miss Stein here has used words without conveying any ideas by them at all : they are no longer parts of speech, they merely form a pattern of familiar sounds. Meaning could not be more utterly abandoned : nothing could offer less scope for intellectual obscurity. The reader need not try to understand—he need only listen. He may sometimes wonder—with this as with some other kindred writing—whether what he hears is worth listening to, but that is another question.

V

COMMUNICATION

Je réglai la forme et le mouvement de chaque consonne, et, avec des rythmes instinctifs, je me flattai d'inventer un verbe poétique accessible, un jour ou l'autre, à tous les sens. Je réservais la traduction.—RIMBAUD, *Alchimie du Verbe*.

MODERN LITERATURE, we have seen, is most often called obscure because its readers seek to understand what they should be content to feel. They think that the writer is trying to tell them something, when in fact he is only anxious that they should enjoy listening to him.

But the fault is not always entirely theirs. They may mistake one kind of communication for another, but it is not always easy, even for those who recognize that the writer does not intend to convey an intelligible message, to be sure what is the contact that he intends to establish, what precisely it is that his reader is intended to enjoy. For a contact which is sought to be effected by verbal intercourse, but in which the intellect plays little or no part, is a precarious affair, and when the words in question are determined by purely personal associations often enough no contact at all can be established. The question of obscurity in modern poetry is thus closely

linked up with the larger question of communication between minds.

For one human being to communicate his experience fully to another is impossible, for every one of our experiences is unique, and something of what goes to make it what it is must be lost when we attempt to recreate it. Some of these factors, it is true, it can afford to lose ; for instance, each experience has its being at a moment of time which cannot recur, and many of our experiences belong to places which we cannot revisit, but not all such experiences are related to their temporal and spatial setting in such a way that if they had happened elsewhere and at another time they would have been qualitatively different. So too, the undoubted difficulty of communicating to others the nature of our sense-perceptions does not arise from the fact that our awareness of a common world of objects is reached through sensations entirely private to ourselves. But it is a vital characteristic of each of our experiences that it is ours, and therefore belongs to a certain context of thought and feeling, a context from which it cannot be abstracted without some loss of quality.

This is most clearly true of that part of our experience which we call our emotions ; we recognize that we can never wholly communicate to another what we have in our hearts, because our hearts are of

a unique complexity, from which it is impossible to disentangle any single strand and so present it that it is to another exactly what it is to us. Hence it comes about that, in a very special sense,

in the sea of life enisled
We mortal millions live alone.

Unfortunately the desire to transcend the conditions of living as individuals, by sharing with others our insulated selves or by escaping into a realm where the boundaries of our finitude no longer limit us, is one of the strongest of human desires, and the failure to fulfil it is in consequence one of the most powerful causes of human unhappiness. Religion and love are two of the means by which men try to satisfy this desire, and their importance in the world is a testimony to its strength.

Yet we do not live in a complete isolation. For by the power of the mind it is possible to discover objects that do not belong to the world of purely private experience, to disentangle the threads of our own ravelled consciousness, and by speech to communicate to others our awareness of them. This is the privilege of intelligent beings, not wholly immersed in the stream of individual sensation, but able to apprehend the unity of self, and to recognize identity persisting among heterogeneous surroundings, able to abstract, to refer, to construct, and to

confer with other intelligent beings by the symbols of speech.¹

The communication that we thus achieve with those around us is of two sorts, which are best exemplified in what we should in everyday speech call communication of feeling (as when one communicates to another his grief or his enthusiasm) and communication of meaning.

The first sort of communication can never be completely satisfactory because it involves the recreation of something which is necessarily unique. We are asking another to realize in his own experience something that belongs to ours. The second sort can be complete, because its object either lies outside or is abstracted from the texture of our experience—the matter of our thought is not personal to us as is the matter of our feeling—and its complement is not realization but understanding. When we communicate our thought to another we do not ask that he should think it, as we did, for himself, but simply that he should understand it.

The world around us is such, and language itself is so imperfectly adapted to it, that it is only in certain fields of thought that we can communicate

¹ Even supposing it to be true that it is impossible ever to abstract completely from experience, and that consequently no two persons can ever understand exactly the same thing, that would be no reason for renouncing (as do the writers here discussed) those means in our power which enable us to achieve a practical measure of communication.

our meaning precisely. Logic and mathematics are two fields in which the objects about which we discourse are purely intelligible and the relations which we indicate between them can be exactly understood ; when two trained minds apply their powers to a mathematical demonstration they understand the same thing and understand it completely.

Poets usually choose to write their poems about objects which are not purely intelligible ; their aim is to achieve communication of emotion as well as of thought. But, until the advent of the Symbolists, it had never been questioned that the communication of thought was part of their aim, that they desired, among other things, to be understood, and that in the composition and in the appreciation of their work the intellect played a large, if not a leading, part.¹

The aim of the literature under discussion is to dispense with the intellect, or at least with its dis-

¹ It is not out of place here to observe that the title "Symbolist" is, to say no more, misleading. A symbol is something chosen, by agreement between two or more minds, to stand for something else, so that its use shall recall the same thing to each ; so by means of symbols they can completely understand each other. The Symbolists refused to use language thus : they disregarded conventional significance, and insisted that words and ideas had a significance determined either by some mysterious inherent power or by individual experience, but certainly not by convention. "Science," says Newman (*Lectures on University Subjects*, 1859, p. 39), "uses words merely as symbols, but literature uses language in its full compass" ; it was against the use of words "merely as symbols" that the Symbolists, in the interests of literature, revolted. The term "Symbolist" may have an historical justification, but its inapplicability is none the less worth noting.

cursive faculty, to renounce, largely if not entirely, the operations of abstracting, defining, relating. In proportion as it achieves this aim the problem of communication becomes increasingly difficult.

For by forgoing the intellectual faculties a writer renounces the possibility of communicating thought, and also the possibility of communicating feeling through the understanding—of arousing emotions, as has been the universal practice of writers in the past, by means of the implications and associations of what is meant.

This renunciation of the intellect may spring from a high aim : it may spring from the recognition that language, for many of the purposes for which we use it, is a makeshift, and from the desire to achieve through poetry something which is beyond the power of ordinary speech.

Many English poets and critics have declared that the powers and aims of poetry are in a way mysterious and even holy, but English writers have been for the most part preoccupied with practice, and have left it to others to develop theories which may be said to underlie their work, but to which they themselves have never troubled to conform. In France, where criticism and creation walk more closely together, and poets seem to be conscious of, and even to be guided by, æsthetic theory as well as literary convention, much attention has been given to the funda-

mental aims of poetry, and a theory has been formulated which might justify, even if it has not inspired, the Symbolists and their followers.

This theory concerns what is called pure poetry—*la poésie pure*—and its chief expositor is M. l'Abbé Brémond. According to M. Brémond, a poetic effect is obtained without the mediation of the intellect. The appreciation of poetry is an experience akin to prayer. Only on this theory, he says, can we account for the effect upon us of a poetic phrase, or line, or passage. Poetry owes its power of influencing us to a mysterious quality residing in words—not in their sound, or rhythmical arrangement, still less in their intelligible content: “*les idées, les images, les sentiments*” are “*impuretés dont la prose revendique le monopole*”—which makes them capable of transmitting that which cannot be communicated by a purely intellectual operation. “*Tout poème doit son caractère proprement poétique à la présence, au rayonnement, à l'action transformante et unifiante d'une réalité mystérieuse que nous appelons poésie pure.*”¹

In poetry, therefore, the intelligible is an impurity; Valéry himself, because of the place which he allows the intellect in his poetic theory, is “*poète malgré lui*”: “*pour le poète, la prose est impure parce qu'elle est trop précise, pour Valéry, parce*

¹ *La Poésie Pure*, p. 16.

qu'elle ne l'est pas assez." ¹ Again, "Impure, en un mot, l'éloquence, entendant par là non pas l'art de beaucoup parler pour ne rien dire, mais bien l'art de parler pour dire quelque chose." ² It follows that in the appreciation of pure poetry the intellect plays no part, and that a peasant girl can appreciate the poetic effect of a liturgy though it be said in a language which she does not understand. So, too, it must follow that a poet might attain this mysterious effect by arranging words without the assistance of the intellect, and on no intelligible plan. Nor is it merely "sentiments" that he must eschew, if he wishes for absolute purity; it is ideas and "images" as well. A mysterious power attaches to the word, not as the purveyor of ideas, but intrinsically.

So both sound and meaning are banished from the word, and we are well on the way to silence; and so it is that the worship of "le Verbe," the mystical power of the naked word, passes into a worship of "le Néant," and poetry is only counted pure when speech, having long abandoned the attempt to express thought, trembles into silence. The Abbé Brémond, in *La Poésie Pure*, speaks of "deux sortes de démon [qui] partagent l'inspiration des poètes : Il y a le démon du silence—et c'est l'inspiration elle-même; il y a le démon du vers," and he defines their relations, succinctly enough, as "Caliban près

¹ *La Poésie Pure*, p. 68.

² *Ibid.* p. 22.

d'Ariel en extase." Certainly it is difficult to do justice to this doctrine in ordinary language, and its exponents, in their attempts to explain it, continually have recourse to metaphor and to the experience of religious mystics.

Such experiences, however, are not always specifically religious ; in varied kinds, they are the stuff of which even the most orthodox poetry is made. But the poet does not usually attempt to communicate them completely, he confesses his inability to do so, and contents himself with indicating, in intelligible language, the attendant circumstances of his ecstasy. " In poetry," says Forrest Reid (*Apostate*, p. 188), " it was what was *not* said, what was communicated secretly, as in the whispering of spirit to spirit, that I valued." It is the custom of poets to lead us to the brink of silence, but to do so by means of intelligible speech.

So Tennyson was put into a trance by the memory of his dead friend, and found language inadequate to convey it :

Vague words ! but ah, how hard to frame
In matter-moulded forms of speech,
Or ev'n for intellect to reach
Thro' memory that which I became.

A recognition of the inadequacy of " matter-moulded forms of speech " to express experiences of this kind might suggest to the poet an excellent

reason for deserting meaning. Indeed M. Brémond's essays contain much to which the earlier Symbolists might have been ready to subscribe : like Baudelaire, he refers to poetry as a kind of " magic," and when he declares " Poésie, musique, c'est même chose,"¹ he is at one with Mallarmé. If it is true that words, relieved of the degrading office of ministering to thought, can perform the function claimed for them by M. Brémond, modern poets might offer it as a justification of their strangest flights that they are writing that truly pure poetry which none of their predecessors, not even Valéry, has ever quite achieved.

They have not in fact availed themselves of this opportunity—not at least exactly in the form offered by M. Brémond—partly perhaps because a dogmatic mysticism is necessary to support the theory as he presents it, and they are not inclined to acquiesce in his orthodox religious beliefs. Moreover, most of them are disqualified from discipleship because they have not completely banished the intellect, exercising at least those of its functions which enable them to identify and name, with more or less precision, objects and sensations, even if they reject the power of making out of that material intelligible constructions.

Yet it is clear that to these writers the theory is

¹ *La Poésie Pure*. p. 23.

not wholly acceptable. For where it is more than a specious statement of the obvious truth that poetry is most moving when it comes nearest to communicating the incommunicable—and sometimes¹ it seems to amount to no more than that—where it lays down simply that the incommunicable can, *per impossible*, be transmitted² to others, it is strikingly in agreement with the theories of the early Symbolists. Gérard de Nerval's declaration, "A la matière même un verbe est attaché" exactly states the mystical dogma that is common to both lines of thought. It is worth remembering that M. Brémond's original lecture *La Poésie Pure* opened with the words "Les modernes théoriciens de la poésie pure, Edgar Poe, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, M. Paul Valéry, ne sont pas les dangereux novateurs que parfois l'on semble croire."

The chief reason why there remains a gulf between

¹ For instance, where M. Brémond admits that his *poésie pure* is an abstraction and that poetry absolutely pure cannot in the nature of things exist (*Prière et Poésie*, p. 64).

² Something not far removed from such a theory, seems in fact to have been behind the whole movement in France from its earliest beginnings to its most recent developments. M. Emile Bouvier, in his *Initiation à la Littérature d'aujourd'hui Cours Élémentaire* (p. 94) comments thus upon one of the fundamental principles enounced by Jacques Vaché, a leading Dadaïste, "il est dans l'essence des symboles d'être symbolique : autrement dit : la signification symbolique des actes, des objets, et des paysages n'est pas une invention arbitraire de l'artiste, mais correspond à l'existence d'une réalité cachée, plus réelle que la réalité ordinaire (idée déjà latente chez Mallarmé et qui est comme la germe de toute la théorie surréaliste)." This doctrine if it includes a reference to the symbolic, as opposed to the conventional, use of words, hardly differs from that of *La Poésie Pure*.

the theory of M. Brémond and the practice of those whom that theory seeks to justify is that the incommunicables that they wish to communicate are of different kinds. Their aim has been to express not the universal, the infinite experience revealed in moments of rare exaltation, when the individual seems to lose his self, but rather the particular, the individual, the unique at the other end of the scale. Speaking broadly, it is true to say that during the last half-century writers have been increasingly preoccupied with the individual ; they have tried more and more fully to describe the interior life of their characters, and to represent not a world of feelings and objects viewed by a detached observer, but the impressions of individuals themselves.

The most grandiose efforts in this direction are naturally those of the novelists, and the works of Proust and Joyce are the greatest monuments to the Ego that modern literature has produced. This particular manifestation of individualism in modern literature has been very brilliantly analysed by Mr. Edmund Wilson, who would detect its origin in the influence of *Axel*, the "subjectivist" allegory of Villiers de l'Isle Adam.

This subjectivist movement easily coalesces with the movement away from meaning, for both movements lead to the same region—a region where communication is impossible. On the one hand,

individual experience can only be made matter for the understanding at the cost of an intellectual mediation which robs it of its essential uniqueness ; on the other hand, those who make no use of, and no claim upon, the intellect are reduced to recording something which, if they are true to their aim, can have no value for any but themselves.

At this point extremes meet. Intellectual mediation is equally repugnant to one who wishes somehow to communicate the transcendent experiences of which M. Brémond is the mystagogue, and to one who wishes somehow to transmit to others his own physical and emotional sensations in all their uniqueness.

The desire to communicate individual experience without any loss or change of quality might very naturally lead a writer, just as a very different aim has led M. Brémond, to a thorough-going renunciation of the intellect. Those who discarded words with their function of reference and did not attempt to identify and label the items which went to make up their experience, still less to abstract from that experience and indicate an intelligible connection between the abstractions, might claim that only by thus renouncing intellect could they achieve their aim in its entirety.

It seems possible to trace some such endeavour in the utterances of the Dadaïstes and Surréalistes, the

latest inheritors of Symbolist tradition. But their efforts have lain chiefly in other fields than literature, for words with all intelligible content, all meaning and reference, knocked out of them, are, to say the least, unattractive symbols, and "literature" composed of such elements has apparently offered even less hope of communication than analogous travesties of music, painting, and sculpture. Those who take away the life of words in this manner are better advised to employ their corpses simply to make patterns, in the manner of Miss Gertrude Stein.

Few writers, however, have gone so far as Miss Stein; English poets almost invariably use a conventional vocabulary, and intend to convey ideas by what they write. It is only the discursive faculty of the intellect that they forgo, what is lacking from their work is a logical structure, serving to coordinate those ideas into an intelligible whole; instead, they are content to rely upon their suggestive power.

Suggestion, evocation of feeling, may none the less effect communication of a sort—the second of the two sorts of communication described at the beginning of this essay. It is possible to recognize and share another's mood without the intervention of intelligible speech. But even this method of communication is imperilled by the increasing impor-

tance attached nowadays to the feeling and associations of the individual.

If a poet wishes to suggest, through recognizable associations, feelings that are widely shared, he may go very far by this method towards success. But if, as is usually the case, he wishes to arouse through personal associations peculiar states of feeling, he is almost certainly doomed to failure. For there is no lexicon of associations : they are not determined by convention, but by experience, and though our experiences may have much in common with the experiences of those around us, they are in innumerable respects unique, and the suggestive characters of most ideas in our minds are in consequence personal to ourselves. How great a confusion may thus arise can most conveniently be made plain by the use of symbols. The suggestive quality of an idea may be x to a writer, and y to myself and to the majority of his readers. Or it may be y to him and to most of his readers, but z to me. Or, again, it may be y to most of his readers, but x to him and z to me. Such an analysis is crude, but the truth that underlies it is simple, undeniable, and important.

For it is just those states of feeling which are peculiar to himself, just those experiences which he does not share with others, that the modern writer is as a rule concerned to convey. He seeks the material for his art in the private recesses of his con-

sciousness, and it is a misfortune that he should have chosen the least favourable method of conveying this least communicable of material.

Suggestion most plays havoc with communication, however, not in determining the choice of ideas, but in determining the method of connecting them. Often enough in modern poetry the ideas themselves seem recognizable, and it is fairly plain what states of feeling they are intended to evoke, but the reason for their sequence remains a mystery to the reader. The mystery is usually due to the fact that the sequence has been determined by the associations personal to the writer attaching in his mind to the objects of his thoughts or reverie ; each has been allowed to suggest the next at random, and the reader is deprived, not merely of that intelligible scheme which enables him to follow thought in the work of an orthodox writer, but of that associative key which might explain an illogical juxtaposition of ideas if the artist who assembled them had kept in view the associations which were likely to be shared by at least a majority of his readers.

So communication becomes impossible, and the suggestive poet is driven to writing for himself alone. He may begin with some such theory of *Correspondances* as is indicated in Baudelaire's sonnet of that name, and is more explicitly stated in the *Manifeste de l'Ecole Symboliste* of Moréas : " tous les phénomènes con-

crets ne sauraient se manifester eux-mêmes : ce sont là de simples apparences sensibles, destinées à représenter leurs affinités ésotériques avec les idées primordiales," or with Rimbaud's view that each vowel has an affinity with a certain colour. But in the end he will find that there are as few subscribers to his belief in this esoteric idiom of ideas as there are to the dogmas of M. Brémond, and that he will be reduced to depend upon a community of associations valid only in that realm of common experience from which he is anxious to escape.

In fact, writers who have relied upon suggestion alone have soon found it an insufficient method of communication. Rimbaud, who anticipated in his own brief career the development of the movement which he helped to initiate, himself confessed this : "Je finis par trouver sacré le désordre de mon esprit."

Mallarmé, too, has failed signally to establish a reliable contact with his readers : " Par exemple, le sonnet célèbre :

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui,
a été interprété par M. Martino comme "*l'éternelle protestation du poète qui sent son impuissance à traduire un rêve intérieur*" ; par M. René Lalou, comme une série d'analogies inspirées par les divers sens du mot cygne ; par M. Bernard Fay, comme un acte de foi dans la postérité qui vengera l'auteur incompris ;

par M. Soula comme une invitation à changer de système poétique. . . .¹

English writers have not, perhaps, provoked such a striking diversity of interpretations as this, but it would be an easy though an unprofitable task to set down confident and conflicting explanations of the work of T. S. Eliot and his contemporaries, showing how completely its admirers are out of touch with the authors whom they praise. It would be an unprofitable task, because these divergences are often enough due to the fact that the inquirer is on the wrong track, and has sought an intelligible content that is not there, and a writer must not be blamed for such entire misunderstanding of his aim. But even the intelligent and sympathetic reader must be at a loss : even if he recognizes where it is that he is meant to understand, and where that he is meant merely to be affected, a writer's dependence upon suggestion, and upon purely personal associations, cannot but leave him helplessly in doubt what state of feeling the poem is intended to induce.

The poet, it is true, has a very simple answer. Communication, whether of emotion or of feeling, need not be his aim. He may be content simply to express himself.

So long as his work pleases him, his readers have no right to complain ; more particularly, if it gives

¹ M. Emile Bouvier, *Initiation à la Littérature d'aujourd'hui*, pp. 35-6.

them any pleasure at all, it is ungrateful in them to object that that pleasure did not arise from their having understood something. If he does not wish to communicate anything, or to arouse feelings of any particular kind, he cannot be blamed for having failed to do so.

Whether in fact the desire of self-expression—the desire simply to repeat or to achieve certain experience in (if we may so put it) an externalized form—is ever enough to account for an artist's work, is a difficult question. It is difficult to think that an artist ever composes without having in view some imaginary audience, some intelligence not his own, if only to aid him in the process of composition by determining the form which his self-expression is to take, although the idea of showing his work, when it is composed, to any living being may never occur to him. How otherwise should the work of art come into existence? How should it differ from the raw material of private experience out of which it is made? ¹

¹ The objections to the theory that a work of art can ever consist of mere expression are excellently put in Lascelles Abercrombie's *Theory of Art*, pp. 45 *sqq.* "What happens when an artist makes a work of art? He makes his experience communicable: and in order to make it exactly and perfectly so he will spend the whole force of his spirit. . . ." "There is no such thing as a private work of art: all art is public property." To know one's experience is to express it internally, and if that is all the expression the artist wants he need do no more than recognize his own experience; "Yet we

However this may be, none of the poets who claim attention today seems ever to have professed this aim : the desires which impel a poet to write are two, says Mr. Auden, the desire for " Creation," and the desire for " Company " ; the author who writes simply for himself is a mythical creature who does not exist outside the text-books of æsthetic theory ; and, indeed, the obscurest of modern writers have never pretended to eschew all contact with their readers : at most their wish has been to excite emotion without transmitting meaning, to substitute one sort of communication for another.

Just as few, if any, English poets have boasted themselves completely independent of their audience, so few, if any, of their readers are ready to admit that they take poetry from a poet impersonally, as they would buy a drug from a dealer : they invariably claim, if not to understand their author, at least to know what it is that he intends them to feel. Three-quarters of the confusion which veils the simple issues presented by modern literature is due to those eager critics who, even if they do not look for meaning where no meaning is, at least profess to follow connections of feeling which in fact are mysteries insoluble unless the writers responsible for them allow their readers

know that he will show himself specifically to be an artist by the precise fact that he will do something more. He does not begin to be an artist until he begins to publish his experience."

to share their personal secrets. The causes of this behaviour among the critics are several : self-deception, honest misunderstanding, and reluctance to admit that they are completely out of touch with work which, in fact, offers no possibility of communication. Its effect has been to encourage poets to write without disentangling in their own minds the inconsistencies of aim which the critics are ready to overlook, and to exploit idiosyncrasies to which their readers attach an undue value.

V I

S P E C I M E N S

Cummings : Pound : Sitwell : Aldington : Read : Joyce : Eliot : Auden.

I lose my patience, and I own it too,
When works are censur'd, not as bad, but new.

POPE.

THAT THE proof of the pudding is in the eating is a piece of proverbial wisdom which seems to be forgotten in most discussions of contemporary verse. That this truth should be neglected is largely the fault not of those who write the poetry of today, but to its hostile critics. Few of them attack modern poetry for what it is ; they are too busy inquiring why it is not what it is not, in showing how it offends against established canons, in discussing not the quality of a given poem but whether anything like it can be accounted poetry at all. In the welter of such controversies, the merits and demerits of the works that give rise to them are apt to be overlooked.

It is not very long since poets were blamed because their verse did not scan, without any inquiry into the effects that may be obtained by a free use of rhythm : that is a charge which today is seen to amount to very little. Today poets are blamed because their verses do not mean, without any

inquiry into the qualities that may attach to the unintelligible, and it may not be very long before that charge is seen to be equally wide of the mark—the only mark at which criticism (unless it is dealing specifically with literary history or literary technique) is concerned to aim : artistic value. Yet it is at these and kindred matters that criticism points its shafts : the fault-finders are so busy with the difference between what confronts them and what they are accustomed to, with the transgression of hitherto accepted boundaries, in taste, in subject, in technique, that they never reach the point of accepting these strange new things as literature, and passing upon them a purely æsthetic judgment. To continue the metaphor of the proverb, they are so perplexed about the legitimacy of unprecedented ways of cooking, of serving up what has hitherto been deemed inedible, of taking meals at unaccustomed hours, that they forget that there is such a thing as taste.

Modern poetry has gained by this forgetfulness. For it is easy to answer criticisms which are founded on the mistaken belief that there are rules of literature established by tradition, and that the writer who breaks them is disqualified and his work out of court. The writer need only insist, in answer, that every work of art has a right to be judged as what it is ; that he has a right to be criticized without pre-

judice and without preconception, without reference to convention or to rule, simply upon his merits. Thus only can a dish, a wine, a work of literature or any other art, secure the praise or blame that it deserves. What virtue is there, the poet may justly ask, in simply having kept the rules? and if a work has merit, how does it suffer from the fact that nothing like it has been produced before, that its author has broken laws which if observed would have prevented it from coming into being? The blame which authors have to fear is that which is spoken when rules are forgotten and the work itself is judged.

Modern poetry very rarely undergoes such a pure æsthetic judgment—very rarely, at any rate, at the hands of its unfriendly critics. They, as its authors very rightly may insist, are so preoccupied with the objections of the doctrinaire that they never give it a chance of being judged as literature. To this result the poets themselves contribute; it is not necessary to study their writing, whether in prose or in verse, for very long, to see that they for their part are profoundly interested, almost every one of them, in the nature of poetry and the circumstances in which it comes to be written. They are interested in themselves, and above all interested in themselves as poets. And much of their verse seems written defiantly, as a challenge to orthodoxy of outlook

and technique. So it is made easy for the uninstructed reader to attend to the challenge and forget that the proper claim of a work of art is a claim, not to our agreement, but to our appreciation, and to acquiesce unconsciously in the view that heterodoxy is not merely no crime, but is in itself an artistic achievement. So much of modern verse is occupied with an implicit claim by the poet to the right to differ from his predecessors, and the claim is so obviously just and yet arouses so much foolish opposition, that the modern poet usually escapes comparison with his predecessors in the simple matter of merit.

In the foregoing essays we have examined one of the chief of the new aims that engage the poets of today ; the present essay is an inquiry into the measure of their success. The legitimacy of that aim is not in question : to call it into question would be to commit the very fault of which we have just accused the majority of uninstructed readers. In art, anything that succeeds in pleasing a discerning taste is legitimate : *tout genre est bon, hors le genre ennuyeux*. Let us therefore forget the means and look to the end ; let us see how far the poets of today succeed in producing work of merit, in creating beauty, in giving pleasure.

It is not very easy to decide how to choose the material to be presented here as specimens of the

achievement of writers who have employed, in one way or another, the associative method. Tolstoy, in order to escape the imputation of unfairness in his attack upon Mallarmé and his associates, reprinted, with superb impartiality, whatever piece happened to stand on the twenty-eighth page of each of the volumes that he wished to criticize. That method, however, will hardly serve any but an indiscriminating critic. Equally to be avoided, though more alluring, is the choice of those pieces which show their authors at their worst. Though it would be easy and amusing to select pieces which prove that poets today have often deserted meaning only to write nonsense that is dull, disgusting, or ridiculous, such a selection would not serve the purpose of this essay. For though such poems may be more representative of modern verse than are their more successful efforts, it is as misleading as it is unfair to judge the merits of a method or the ability of its exponents by looking only at examples in which they have not done justice to it or to themselves. Indeed, if the purpose of a selection is to show the best that a writer or a school of writers can achieve, the only justifiable way to make it so is to choose those pieces which to the critic himself seem to be the most favourable specimens that he can find. This essay, however, is not concerned only with poetic achievement, it is concerned with the state

of literature generally ; its object is to show the result of certain practices upon criticism as well as poetry, to illustrate the interactions of poetry and criticism, to make plain what it is that those poets seem to aim at and those critics to admire who are guided, consciously or unconsciously, by the desire to desert significance—to estimate, in short, the actual effect of this desire upon the work of the ablest and most admired of the artists who have been affected by it. The best way to achieve this end is not to choose only the most artistically successful of associative works, but to choose from among poems which remain true to this principle some of those which the critics consider to have justified it in practice. Three principles that have been observed in this attempt to estimate the achievement of modern writers : first, to choose for examination the work of the most, not the least, successful exponents of the new method ; second, to bear in mind, and not to criticize, the aims with which they write ; third, where there is need of enlightenment about their work, to seek it from those who sympathize with and admire them, not from their detractors. Only thus can a just estimate be reached of the aims of modern poets and the standard by which they are judged.

One proviso must be made. The examples which follow will not conform exactly to the types of verse

which have been analysed in the earlier essays in this book. This is partly because examples thus chosen have already been given ; partly because the types were themselves arrived at by analysis and abstraction, and separate examples of each are hard to come by ; partly because in the work of most contemporary writers association plays several parts at once, and those ill-understood by the writers themselves. Eager though they are for novelty of method, for fruitful exploration of new fields, they do not for the most part seem to have thought out, as did their French predecessors, the implications of their undertaking : they seem only to be vaguely grateful for freedom from the shackles of reason and for a larger liberty to dip at will into the subconscious, and to believe that their own peculiar reactions and fantasies and associations have a " validity " which warrants their giving to their own " ego " an attention which makes them uncompromisingly oblivious of the existence of their readers.

In order, therefore, to assess the influence of the cult of association on modern poetry we shall take a few typical specimens from the work of the most accomplished of those poets who are subject to its influence and see how they have been received by their admirers. That this involves examining passages where they deviate into sense, and where the theories on which their method seems to depend

have been lost sight of, must be accounted the fault not of the critic, but of the poets themselves.

It will be convenient to take first a poem which raises the problem that has been the main topic of this series of essays, the substitution of suggestion for meaning, and to read it in the light of the criticism of one of the most intelligent, if one of the most wayward, expositors of modern verse. The poem is by Mr. E. E. Cummings, and the critic is Mr. Robert Graves, who describes it¹ as "one of E. E. Cummings' earlier and simpler poems"; it runs as follows :

SUNSET

stinging
gold swarms
upon the spires
silver
 chants the litanies the
great bells are ringing with rose
the lewd fat bells
 and a tall
wind
is dragging
the
sea
with
dream
—s

¹ *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* by Laura Riding and Robert Graves, 1929, p. 11.

Mr. Graves justly points out that it is "impossible to read the poem as a logical sequence." An attempt to do so will clearly reveal to the reader that its obscurity is not of the intellectual kind which can be vanquished by thinking hard about what it means ; it is an attempt, in the true Symbolist tradition, to work with ideas solely as a means of suggestion. Treating it as such, Mr. Graves gives a careful and sympathetic analysis of its effect : " The first word, *stinging*, taken alone suggests merely a sharp feeling ; its purpose is only to prepare for the poem and supply an emotional source from which the other *s* ideas may derive. In the second line *swarms* develops the alliteration, at the same time colouring stinging with the association of golden bees and softening it with the suppressed idea of buzzing. We are now ready for the more tender *s* word, *spires*, in the third line " and so on ; he concludes by printing a poem, which he has himself composed, which " links up grammatically what appeared to be an arrangement based on caprice."

SUNSET PIECE

After reading Rémy De Gourmont

White foam and vesper wind embrace.
The salt air stings my dazzled face
And sunset flecks the silvery seas,
With glints of gold like swarms of bees
And lifts tall dreaming spires of light

To the imaginary sight,
So that I hear loud mellow bells
Swinging as each great wave swells,
Wafting God's perfumes on the breeze,
And chanting of sweet litanies.
When jovial monks are on their knees,
Bell pounced and lifting glutton eyes
To windows rosy as the skies.
And this slow wind—how can my dreams forget—
Dragging the waters like a fishing net.

This reconstruction is ingenious and plausible. And though a dozen equally plausible pieces might be produced, though every one of Mr. Graves' interpretations of the ideas constituting the poem is open to the deepest doubt, let us accept this reconstruction as correct. For it is not Mr. Cummings' method that is in question, but Mr. Graves' appraisal of the result that he has achieved.

"This version," says Mr. Graves, after quoting his own "grammatical" *Sunset Piece*, "shows that Cummings was bound to write the poem as he did in order to prevent it from becoming what we have made it." Why, if not itself, it would necessarily have been the thing he gives us, Mr. Graves does not explain. Very beautiful and very moving poems, poems very different from *Sunset Piece*, have been inspired by sunsets in the past. And, in any case, having decided not to write Mr. Graves' poem, the reader may be tempted to ask, was Mr. Cummings

really bound to write his own substitute? Most of us, after all, have managed to avoid writing Mr. Graves' poem without being forced into the disagreeable alternative of writing that of Mr. Cummings' or anything like it. And is Mr. Cummings' really so much to be preferred? To one at least of its readers Mr. Graves' seems slightly the less unpleasing of the two.

Mr. Graves' comment reveals the attitude of many modern writers and critics towards the art of literature. Two unpleasant pieces are put before us, and we are told that if the author had not written the first, in his own new method, he would have had to have written the second, in the method of his predecessors. And his readers manifest so much concern about the difference between the new method and the old that they forget to ask whether any end is served by writing bad poems, whether of one sort or of the other.¹

¹ It is exactly thus that Mr. H. R. Williamson (*The Poetry of T. S. Eliot*, pp. 28 *sqq.*) attempts to justify the novelty of T. S. Eliot's method. He contrasts a mediocre poem by Mr. John Drinkwater with a passage from Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, both poems being apparently the expression of a very similar state of mind—despair, and a desire to pray. In Eliot's poem, he says, "we are not sitting at ease in a pew, awaiting further titillation of our jaded emotional palates. We are penitents, bare knees on the stone, receiving words like lashes." He neglects to observe that the use of the manner that Mr. Eliot rejects need not lead to the production of a poem like Mr. Drinkwater's, and that Mr. Eliot's manner will not necessarily succeed where Mr. Drinkwater's has failed. Mistakes of this sort betray an uneasy (and quite erroneous) belief that a new method in literature needs some other justification than its own success.

In almost every example given in this chapter it is a probable explanation of the novelty of method, that the writer, consciously or unconsciously, desired not to improve on an orthodox manner, but at all costs to avoid it.

An excellent example is the work of Mr. Ezra Pound, who by a somewhat ironic fate has gained his great reputation chiefly by his innovations, though it is where his work is least novel that it is most successful. His translations from the Chinese are simple and elegant, but it seems that the fear that this should be the only distinction of his writing has led him to adopt in his original poems a more personal style. This style has won him high praise in high quarters: "No one living has practised the art of verse with such austerity and devotion, and no one living has practised it with more success"—is the verdict of Mr. T. S. Eliot himself, who has done Mr. Pound the signal honour of dedicating to him *The Waste Land* and acclaiming him in the dedication with the title *il miglior fabbro*.

It is not therefore an injustice to take as an example of Mr. Pound's work his *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, which, though it is not itself an unintelligible, though it is often an obscure, poem, has undoubtedly exercised a deep influence on writers who seek to exploit idiosyncrasies of feeling at the

expense of intelligible content.¹ "This seems to me," says Mr. Eliot, "a great poem . . . It is compact of the experience of a certain man in a certain place at a certain time, and it is also a document of an epoch ; it is genuine tragedy and comedy ; and it is, in the best sense of Arnold's worn phrase, a ' criticism of life.' " ² A more recent admirer ³ writes, "*Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, it must be repeated, is a whole. The whole is great poetry at once traditional and original. Mr. Pound's standing as a poet rests upon it, and rests securely."

Whole though it be, the short pieces of which *Mauberley* consists treat for the most part of separate subjects and are easily detachable. If the following poem, the third of the series, loses anything through being taken separately, sympathetic imagination will readily supply the loss :

III

"The tea-rose tea-gown, etc
Supplants the mousseline of Cos,
The pianola ' replaces '
Sappho's barbitos.

Christ follows Dionysus,
Phallic and ambrosial

¹ The more suggestive manner of *The Waste Land* is used by Pound in his long unfinished *chef d'œuvre*, the *Cantos*.

² Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems* with an introduction by T. S. Eliot, 1928, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

³ Mr. F. R. Leavis, in *New Bearings in English Poetry*, 1932, p. 150.

Made way for macerations ;
Caliban casts out Ariel.

All things are a flowing,
Sage Heracleitus says ;
But a tawdry cheapness
Shall outlast our days.

Even the Christian beauty
Defects—after Samothrace ;
We see τὸ καλὸν
Decreed in the market-place.

Faun's flesh is not to us,
Nor the Saint's vision.
We have the Press for wafer ;
Franchise for circumcision.

All men, in law, are equals.
Free of Pisistratus,
We choose a knave or an eunuch
To rule over us.

O bright Apollo,
τίν' ἀνδρα, τίν' ἥρωα, τίνα θεὸν,
What god, man, or hero
Shall I place a tin wreath upon ! ”

The treatment of the theme in this poem is a little strange, but in the theme itself there seems to be nothing extraordinary : Mr. Pound is dealing, as many of his contemporaries and even his predecessors have dealt, with the “ modern world of mass-production and levelling-down, a world that has destroyed

the traditions and is hostile, not only to the artist, but to all distinction of spirit.”¹ This poem clearly belongs to the second of the two classes indicated by Mr. Eliot when he says that in some of Mr. Pound’s verse “the content is more important than the means of expression, in the others the means of expression is the important thing.” Here it must be the treatment and not the content that claims our attention. We know well that the pianola with all it stands for has replaced the lyre : we are interested to see what is the peculiar magic by means of which Mr. Pound has invested this theme with poetry. Let us see how the same theme has fared in other hands : when Mr. Pound says that “We see τὸ καλὸν decreed in the market-place” another said before him, expressing not, it is true, the identical contrast between a pure and a commercialized standard of beauty, but, in a very similar spirit, the opposition between a world dominated by the Stock Exchange and the beauties of a pagan and Hellenic world :

“The world is too much with us ; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.”

And Mr. Pound’s invocation of Apollo, his hankering after the “mousseline of Cos”—are akin to the impulse which was expressed in the words :

¹ *New Bearings*, p. 145.

“ Great God ! I’d rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn ;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn ;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea ;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.”

The thought expressed in Mr. Pound’s poem is a little more complex, a shade more interesting than that ; and in his poem he has avoided using such words as “ pleasant lea ”, which he would no doubt regard as a worn-out *cliché* (though when his poems are as old as Wordsworth’s, his own “ Phallic and ambrosial ” may itself have come to sound a little worn) ; but is he, on the whole, a gainer ? No one will suggest that because his mood was in some respects identical with Wordsworth’s, he should himself have written Wordsworth’s poem or something like it. But it may well be asked whether it is possible to detect in the studied idiosyncrasies of his manner that advance upon the orthodox, that fruitful poetic exploration, which commands the homage of his admirers. Can we recognize in the “ means of expression ” that “ importance ” which Mr. Eliot would have us see there ; or must the performance be adjudged at best a failure, at worst a sham ? The uninstructed reader might be tempted to say that the expression of this commonplace thought is itself redeemed from the commonplace

only by two peculiarities : it is peculiarly pretentious and it is peculiarly cheap.

Mr. Leavis, however, knows better. In *Mauberley*, he says, "The rhythms, in their apparent looseness and carelessness, are marvels of subtlety . . . and the verse has extraordinary variety. The subtlety of movement is associated with subtlety of mood and attitude. 'Wit' is present. Critical activity accompanies feeling and remembering."¹ Where wit is present and critical activity accompanies feeling and remembering, there are certainly the makings of a delightful poetic gathering, and this poem is singled out by Mr. Leavis for especial admiration, in order to show that Mr. Pound's "poise, though so varied, and for all his audacities, is sure ; how sure, nothing can show better than the last stanza of the third poem :

" O, bright Apollo,
 τίν' ἀνδρα, τίν' ἥρωα, τίνα θεόν,
 What god, man, or hero
 Shall I place a tin wreath upon ! "

In what poet, after the seventeenth century, can we find 'anything like this contributing to a completely serious effect (the poem is not only tragically serious but solemn).'²

¹ *New Bearings*, p. 143.

² *New Bearings*, p. 144. It is a pity that Mr. Leavis has not explained the effect aimed at by Mr. Pound in his mis-accentuations

The influence of Mauberley can be gauged from the following typical stanza, taken from a 200-line poem, entitled (I suppose wittily) *Phallus in Wonderland* and printed in *New Verse*, a periodical printed in Cambridge which claims to represent all the valuable elements in contemporary poetry :

“ Prima coitio est acerrima ” (Terence) ;
 In 1889 I first encountered woman
 And copulated unsatisfactorily
 Owing to ignorance.

It would be unfair to judge *Mauberley* by a section which is admittedly not the finest of the series. That praise is reserved for a piece in the second division of the poem, *Mauberley II*. To do justice to this poem it must be quoted in full :

II

“ Qu'est-ce qu'ils savent de l'amour, et
 qu'est-ce qu'ils peuvent comprendre ?

(carefully preserved by himself when he quotes and Mr. Eliot when he edits the poem) in the second line. Of four different words, three are wrongly accented. Mr. Pound's Latin is also sometimes strange : cf. *Selected Poems*, pp. 81 (Gaudero) ; 134 (vir quidem) ; 180 (Secut). The way in which Mr. Pound attempts to quote Catullus on p. 83 suggests that his knowledge of the language is elementary. It would be captious to call attention to such points as these, if it were not that much of the respect accorded to Mr. Pound is apparently due to his reputation for scholarship in Latin, Greek, Provençal, and Chinese. His learning in the latter pair of languages I take on trust ; it is difficult to believe that the mistakes which occur almost as often as he ventures into the former pair are due invariably to the printer.

“ S'ils ne comprennent pas la poésie, s'ils ne sentent pas la musique, qu'est ce qu'ils peuvent comprendre de cette passion en comparaison avec laquelle la rose est grossière et le parfum des violettes un tonnerre ? ”

CAID ALI.

“ For three years, diabolus in the scale,
He drank ambrosia,
All passes, ANANGKE prevails,
Came end, at last, to that Arcadia.

He had moved amid her phantasmagoria,
Amid her galaxies,
NUKTIS 'AGALMA.

.

Drifted . . . drifted precipitate,
Asking time to be rid of . . .
Of his bewilderment ; to designate
His new-found orchid . . .

To be certain . . . certain . . .
(Amid aerial flowers) . . . time for arrangements—
Drifted on
To the final estrangement ;

Unable in the supervening blankness
To sift TO AGATHON from the chaff
Until he found his sieve . . .
Ultimately, h's seismograph :

—Given that is his ' fundamental passion,'
This urge to convey the relation

Of eyelid and cheek-bone
By verbal manifestations ;

To present the series
Of curious heads in medallion—

He had passed, unconscious, full gaze,
The wide-banded irides
And Botticellian sprays implied
In their diastasis ;

Which anæsthesia, noted a year late,
And weighted, revealed his great affect,
(Orchid), mandate
Of Eros, a retrospect.

.

Mouths biting empty air,
The still stone dogs,
Caught in metamorphosis, were
left him as epilogues."

The detached critic, ready always to find merit in new fields, may pause for a moment before this performance, asking what in it he is to admire. Is it beauty of sound? hardly, where every line is harsh and grating. Is it a sequence of lovely images? That will be sought equally in vain. Nor can the piece lay claim to intellectual interest: the thought that appears to inform it is singularly commonplace. Mr. Leavis, however, can tell us why Mr. Eliot thinks this "great" and the ordinary reader may welcome his explanation (though according to Mr.

Leavis "it seems impertinent to explain what so incomparably explains itself, and all elucidation looks crude").¹ "The poem is poignantly personal, and yet, in its technical perfection, its ironical economy, impersonal and detached. Consider, for instance, the consummate reserve of this :

‘ Unable in the supervening blankness
To sift TO AGATHON from the chaff
Until he found his sieve . . .
Ultimately, his seismograph : ’

—With what subtle force the shift of image in the last line registers the realization that the ‘ orchid ’ was something more, the impact more than æsthetic ! And with what inevitability the ‘ seismograph ’ and the scientific terminology and manner of what follows convey the bitter irony of realization in retrospect ! ”²

One of the most admired of modern critics is here appraising the *chef d’œuvre* of one of the most successful of modern poets ; and yet it sounds much as if an impostor had duped a clever fool into writing high-sounding nonsense. “ And this ”—we are tempted when we see such work thus praised, to repeat the words of an earlier critic—“ is fine poetry ! ”³ This is what ranks its writer with the

¹ *New Bearings*, p. 139.

² *Ibid.*, p. 148.

³ “ a great poem,” Mr. Eliot ; “ great poetry,” Mr. Leavis.

master-spirits of the age!¹ This is what has been described, over and over again, in terms which would require some qualification if used respecting *Paradise Lost*.² [This is] to be held to admiration as an inestimable specimen of art.³ And what must we think of a system by means of which verses like those which we have quoted, verses fit only for the poets' corner of the *Morning Post*, can produce emolument and fame? "What word of this, except perhaps the reference to the *Morning Post*, is not applicable to the passages that have been quoted from the works of Mr. Pound and of Mr. Pound's admirers?

Our next example is chosen from another writer who has exploited to the full personal idiosyncrasy in the choice and use of imagery, and has combined it with the attempt to convey some sort of meaning. Her happiest effects have been attained when she wishes merely to present a pattern; her verse is most pleasing when it is purely decorative; but, like Mr. Pound, she seems never to have thought out her aims clearly, and intellect is always trespassing in her poetry with the most unfortunate results. In our attempt to elucidate this example we shall again avail ourselves of Mr. Graves's skill in

¹ "a document of an epoch," Mr. Eliot.

² "genuine tragedy . . . a criticism of life," Mr. Eliot.

³ "marvels of subtlety . . . technical perfections," Mr. Leavis.

exposition. *Lullaby for Jumbo*, No. 5 of Miss Sitwell's *Façade*, runs as follows :

“Jumbo asleep !
Grey leaves thick-furred
As his ears, keep
Conversations blurred.
Thicker than hide
Is the trumpeting water ;
Don Pasquito's bride
And his youngest daughter
Watch the leaves
Elephantine grey :
What is it grieves
In the torrid day ?
Is it the animal
World that snores
Harsh and inimical
In sleepy pores ?—
And why should the spired flowers
Red as a soldier
Make Don Pasquito
Seem still mouldier ? ”

Here one is willing to believe (though, as Mr. Graves says, the “Aristotelian-minded reader” is likely to “stumble over the imagery”) the writer wishes to convey a meaning ; Mr. Graves is able to reveal it. “I read this poem,” he says, “as the expression of some conflict of the authoress in terms of a general *ennui* with sober life in England and a

hankering after the colour of the South. In particular it stages with the easily recognizable imagery of trumpeting elephants and tall red flowers like soldiers, the Southern passions in frustration. The sleeping elephant is the common object of the conflict : it represents the stupid, sleeping, crass indifference of some powerful force with paternal attributes, to the desires of some power with maternal attributes and to the authoress herself ; it also represents those dormant powers of passion themselves." It is a surprise to know that to Mr. Graves and Miss Sitwell an elephant means so much, and means to both of them exactly that. A dozen other interpretations might occur to other readers, and where is the means of deciding which is right ? Miss Sitwell may have wished to express this particular conflict, but the world might never have dreamed of her intention, had it not been for the offices of Mr. Graves. Assuming that Mr. Graves's interpretation is correct, we may still ask why this was the form of expression chosen ? We may forget, in the light of this exposition, the obscurity, and the oddity in itself is by no means a defect, for poetry can be made out of the most grotesque material, the most absurd of objects may be invested with passion, beauty, a vivid interest—as well an elephant as an albatross or a flea. But where is the passion here ? Where the beauty ? Where the interest ? To passion, perhaps,

it lays no claim. All the more, then, may we expect beauty of sound or imagery. Yet the images that present themselves, directly or by association, seem a dull parade, and the few lines that are not downright ugly—with the exception of two, which please moderately the mind and ear (“grey leaves thick-furred” and “Red as a soldier”)—are merely flat. They do not even please by any propriety to what we are told are the mood and the subject of the poem. As for interest, “a general *ennui* with sober life in England, a hankering after the colour of the South” need a little more force, more grace, more subtlety of expression, if they are to engage or to delight the mind. It is not the first time that such an *ennui*, such a longing for the colour of the South, has been expressed in verse, and for the purpose of comparison we may quote a few stanzas from another poet :

“ O Love, what hours were thine and mine,
In lands of palm and southern pine ;
In lands of palm, of orange-blossom,
Of olive, aloe, and maize and vine . . .

How faintly-flush’d, how phantom-fair,
Was Monte Rosa, hanging there
A thousand shadowy-pencill’d valleys
And snowy dells in a golden air . . .

And I forgot the clouded Forth,
The gloom that saddens Heaven and Earth,

The bitter east, the misty summer
And gray metropolis of the North."

These stanzas are not at the highest peak of Tennyson's achievement, but at least they show, whether considered as the expression of a mood, or as a sequence of sounds and images, that the thing can be done without Jumbo, and done better. Either method is open to Miss Sitwell, either is legitimate ; does the method she has chosen justify, in this example, its implicit claims ?

Mr. Richard Aldington is one of the most distinguished of a now disbanded company of writers, who started "a militant movement towards a new poetry" shortly before the Great War, under the name of Imagists. Of their distinction and ability there can be no doubt ; there were only thirteen contributors to their joint anthology, and these included Amy Lowell, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and D. H. Lawrence. Of their achievement something can be gathered from a collection of their poems which has recently been published : *Imagist Poetry*, 1930. Mr. Glenn Hughes, who writes a Foreword to the book, believes that Imagism is "destined to command serious consideration from the literary historians of the future," for apart from its intrinsic merit, "it blazed the way for a myriad younger poets, including the finest of the post-war period." What exactly was the nature of its achievement ?

Mr. Hughes does not leave us in want of particulars :
“ It legitimized free verse, cleared the air of musty artifice and shallow sentiment, revived the clarity and conciseness of the Greeks, substituted classical objectivity for romantic cosmicism, demonstrated the effectiveness of the Oriental miniature, and accomplished a re-wedding of the intellect and the emotions.”

This is indeed a heavy programme, and one which could hardly be fulfilled in any single poem; unfortunately space forbids the selection of more than one :

“ Unyielding
there is no way out
mosaic mask threatens and laughs
that blood was wasted
so were his hers mine
I always knew that brought the gravest pang
there is no way out
who said so ? he said so
no I said so
up those winding stairs
so long and tedious to mount alone
always the mosaic mask
that nothing says and says too much
there is no way out
except the inevitable final plunge
and that's not soon
and yet too soon

round and up they wind
and up and round
blind feeling with finger tips
up and round
there is no way out
but why have entered ?
yes why have entered ?
entered ? well the mask said enter
so beautiful a mask
I forgot the blood
so beautifully so like a god
said enter I forgot the blood
ran stumbling upwards too eagerly
then the mask changed
and yes there is no way out." ¹

The reader may wonder at first which of the functions of the Imagist school this piece fulfils. It can hardly be said to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Oriental miniature, still less, one would suppose, to revive the clarity and conciseness of the Greeks. On the other hand, it might perhaps claim to legitimize free verse, and it seems free enough from musty artifice and shallow sentiment. Whether it helps to substitute classical objectivity for romantic cosmism, what either of those qualities resembles and how one could be substituted for the other—this we confess ourselves unable to determine.

Perhaps the aim of the Imagists which this comes

¹ From *Passages toward a long poem, Imagist Poetry*, p. 28.

nearest to fulfilling is that of wedding intellect and emotion ; it is certainly a good example of the jumble of thoughts and impressions which naturally results when the theories outlined in the foregoing pages are put into practice. And though it hardly justifies most of the high claims made by Mr. Hughes, one at least of his judgments is undeniably true : the production of such poems by reputable writers has “ blazed the way for a myriad younger poets,” and the enthusiastic praise accorded such work by critics has had a very deep effect upon the poetry of today. Mr. Leavis¹ is probably right when he says that the amount of poetical talent existing at different periods of history is probably fairly constant, but that the use to which it is put varies, and varies in accordance with the directions in which it is guided by prevailing taste. The harm that he and his like have done to literature can be estimated by looking at the mass of poetry written with the aim of “ wedding the intellect and the emotions ” as they are wedded in the poem by Mr. Aldington quoted above.

Whatever merits Mr. Aldington’s poem may have, it shares with the work of scores of minor poets whose productions are practically indistinguishable from it. The following, chosen at random, may serve as an example :

¹ *New Bearings*, p. 7.

Volutes of molumn whorl
towards daos
Abracadabr(a) is
mnemonic lozenge
to thy foal's limple doubt
song unresolved
From Egypt Daedalus unfurl
past glowgold sluices of the Sun
flown focus grown slowson palpate
vulnerable to his firm feel.¹

Side by side with this may be placed a similar poem by an English writer of some distinction, Mr. Herbert Read :

THE INNOCENT EYE

The potential
mirror of gentle acts
agent of factual
joy
enjoy
deft enquiry
but shade yourself
against electric signs
Angelicos,
diatoms
of senseful surfeit—
How can man deny you ?
He should employ you
whenever

¹ From *To Icarus*, by Mr. George Reavy.

he wakes in the world
out of dusty fever

and with not worm
and weevil
for whom
God grows staveacre

but with bird and lynx
enlarge his life
with crystal lens
and furtive lust.

The seal of approval has been set upon this poem by its appearance in Mr. Eliot's *Criterion*; ¹ it is quoted here, not from any singularity, but because it is a typical example from a very large class. Poems of this sort (and any one of them is very like any other) are very often written nowadays and are very much admired: this is an example, and not an extreme example, of that "post-war poetry" for which Mr. Aldington, Mr. Pound, Mr. Joyce, and their colleagues "blazed the way." Behind all such work, if it is seriously undertaken, lies the mistaken supposition, which a little clear thinking would have dispelled, and a little taste would have sterilized, that a writer can justify recording the vagaries of his subconscious self, or inventing what phantasmagoria he pleases, or what jumbles of sense and nonsense, by appealing to the part that association

¹ October, 1932, p. 43.

must play in literature, and professing an endeavour to do full justice to its possibilities.

We will conclude this chapter with three more examples : one from James Joyce, perhaps the most extravagantly admired of modern writers of prose ; one from T. S. Eliot, perhaps the most extravagantly admired of modern poets ; and one—a series of extracts from his longest work—from W. H. Auden, who is the most highly praised of the younger writers of today.

Mr. Joyce's reputation stands so high that the most trivial documents from his pen are thought worth preserving, and *The New Statesman* and *Nation*¹ recently printed in full a letter sent by him to " his friend Mr. Sullivan of the Paris Opera," commenting that " one knows of no other similar documents, no letters in a tone of intense admiration and sardonic banter sent by, say, Manzoni to Rubini, or by Flaubert to Gilbert Duprez, or by Ibsen to the Swedish Nightingale." It is worth quoting here because it is a very characteristic example of Mr. Joyce's latest manner :

" Who is this that advances in maresblood caftan, like Hiesons in Finisterre, his eyeholes phyllistained, his jawbones of a crossbacked ? A little child shall lead him. Why, it's Strongman Simpson, Timothy Nathan, now of Simpson's on the Grill !

¹ February 27th, 1932.

Say, Tim Nat, bald winepresser, hast not one air left? But yett he hath. Regard! Auscult! He upbraces for supremacy to the potence of Mosthigh and calls upon his baiters and their temphum: You daggones, be flat!

What was in that long, long note he just delivered? For the laib of me I cannot tell. More twopenny tosh and hexus languor about Isingabob Yen? No such thing, O son of an envelope. Dr. to J. S. Just a pennyplain loafletter from Braun and Bestmann and it will take no rebutter. You may bark Mrs. Liebfraumich as long as you love but you must not busk the baker. Pay us disday our daily bread. And oblige."

* * *

Any pleasure that may be derived from recognizing the punning allusions in a short passage like that just quoted, is more than counterbalanced by the sense of boredom induced by paragraph after paragraph of such sickening and tedious rubbish. If it were not deliberate nonsense, if it were bad in a plain straightforward way, it is doubtful whether the *New Statesman* would have dared to print it even though it bore the name of Mr. Joyce.

Mr. Joyce's prestige as a writer of prose is equalled by Mr. Eliot's as a poet. And Mr. Eliot, having established his reputation by the contents of his *Poems*

1909-1925, is now publishing a series of poems of which the following extract is representative :

That is all we could see. But how many eagles ! and
how many trumpets !

(And Easter Day, we didn't get to the country,
So we took young Cyril to church. And they rang
a bell

And he said right out loud, *crumpets*.)

Don't throw away that sausage,
It'll come in handy. He's artful. Please, will you
give us a light ?

Light

Light

Et les soldats faisaient la haie ? ILS LA FAISAIENT.

This piece, like Mr. Joyce's prose, is an example of how an established reputation and a novel manner can impose upon the public and upon the critics.¹ Exactly what is the aim of either writer in the last quoted passages, how far the reader is meant to understand, how far simply to react ; how much of the content is attributable to personal associations, and where a key to those associations is to be found ; and in what way, if these passages are meant to be treated as unintelligible, they are happier than prose and poetry of a more orthodox kind—none of their readers care apparently to

¹ Eliot's later poetry has not imposed upon all the critics : " It would be regarded as trivial and confused in thought," says Mr. R. L. M  groz (*Modern English Poetry*, p. 204), " if the poet had not stuck to his device of mixing commonplace disconnected statements and remote allusions."

ask.¹ If these questions were kept in mind, there would be an end of such cultivated nonsense.

As it is, the favourable reception of such work leads other younger writers to ape these methods, and our last example is an attempt by a young poet to dislodge sense from the place it has hitherto occupied in writing, an attempt in which the influences both of Joyce and of Eliot may be discerned.

The work in question is *The Orators*, by W. H. Auden. It is, according to its publishers, "a single work with one theme and purpose, partly in prose and partly in verse," it occupies more than a hundred pages, and the way in which it is arranged by the author in three "Books," with a "Prologue" and an "Epilogue," confirms its claim to unity of scheme and purpose. Exactly how far this work can strictly be called intelligible it is difficult to say: the fact that grammatical form is preserved throughout, that its descriptive and narrative passages concern, for the most part, a matter-of-fact and not a fantastic world, hardly makes intelligible the whole or any of the passages of varying length that compose

¹ Mr. Leavis (*New Bearings*, p. 120) says of *Ash Wednesday* that "To take fragments separately at their face value is to misunderstand this poetry, which works by compensations, resolutions, residuums and convergences." The uninstructed reader would often welcome a guide who could tell him how to distinguish a resolution from a residuum and a convergence from a compensation.

it. This is due partly to the fact that most of these passages are themselves impossible to understand, partly to the apparent absence of those "single theme and purpose" which, it is claimed, unify the work.

The Orators consists of three Books, called *The Initiates*, *Journal of an Airman*, and *Six Odes*. Book I is divided into sections called respectively I. *Address for a Prize-Day*, II. *Argument*, III. *Statement*, and IV. *Letter to a Wound*, all in prose. I. and IV. are apparently just what they are called: each is straightforward in itself and in its way amusing ("Some of the senior boys, I expect, will have heard of the great Italian poet Dante, who wrote that very difficult but wonderful poem, *The Divine Comedy*"¹ from the Prize-day address, and "Do you realize we have been together now for almost a year? Eighteen months ago, if anyone had foretold this to me I should have asked him to leave the house. Haven't I ever told you about my first interview with the surgeon? He kept me waiting three-quarters of an hour,"² from the Letter, indicate the nature of each section); II. consists of rambling and disconnected paragraphs, interrupted by a litany calling in turn upon several heroes of detective fiction and the personalities depicted on the signs of public-houses. The following is a fair sample of its character: "Designs for the flow sheet of a mill. Sound of our

¹ p. 14.

² p. 36.

hammers in the solemn beat of a quarry, and the packing of labelled specimens in japanned boxes. Theories inter-relating the system of feudal tenure with metabolic gradients, and arguments from the other side of the lake on the formation of hanging valleys, interrupted by the daughter of the house with a broken doll. Writing reports for Him in the copper-green evenings . . . Girls, it is His will just now that we get up early. But watching the morning dredger, picking the afternoon fruit, wait, do not falsify our obedience . . . ”¹; “ For those who elect to live in the bower ; for those on the hill ; for those who return to the epoch of the poisoner, O Man laden with Mischief, hear us ”²; “ March long black piano, silhouetted head ; cultured daughter of a greying ironmaster, march through fields. The hammer settles on the white-hot ingot. The telescope focuses accurately upon a recent star. On skyline of detritus, a truck, nose up. Loiterer at carved gates, immune stranger, follow. It is nothing your loss. The priest’s mouth opens in the green graveyard, but the wind is against it.”³ III. is a similarly disconnected series of obscure paragraphs, largely consisting of an amusing catalogue of different types of person—“ One has an extraordinary capacity for organizing study-circles. One fosters snowdrops in a green bowl,” and so on.

¹ p. 22.² p. 26.³ p. 29.

Of Book I. it may be said that Sections I. and IV. are in themselves intelligible ; Sections II. and III. are not ; and that there is nothing to explain the relation of any section to any other.

Book II. is a mixture of prose and verse, apparently extracted from the diary of an airman at a future date in an imagined state of actual or imminent civil war. The diary consists of prose jottings, geometrical figures, an "Airman's Alphabet," and short pieces of verse. The reader is transported into the imaginary situation without any explanation of the features that compose it or the characters who are referred to in it. "We must wonder," says the most friendly of Mr. Auden's critics, "if Book II., the journal of an Airman, is perhaps a kind of life of Lawrence, reduced to elements and then built up again ; we must perhaps wander back to matriarchy for the significance of the uncle." The scheme and purpose of this book at any rate are not, it will be gathered, very clear.

What emerges is that there is an enemy whom it is the Airman's business to destroy, and that he (there is a list of his characteristics¹ on pp. 54-6) is

¹ It is a little puzzling that one of the enemy characteristics—the possession of photographs of friends—also characterizes the author himself, whom the reader naturally identifies with the airman—see p. 35 : "I took down all those photographs from my mantelpiece—Gabriel, Olive, Mrs. Marshall, Molim and the others." The identification seems clinched by the references to "Gabriel" in the Airman's Journal, p. 67.

meant to embody kindness and consideration for others, good taste and a respect for convention. The diary concludes with glimpses of the revolution or civil war in progress, interspersed with references to the personal relationships of the airman. The author's aim is apparently to make the whole as chaotic and as difficult to follow as is possible. The following are typical passages, which lose nothing in intelligibility by being detached from their "context."

I'm afraid it sounds more like a fairy story.

There was a family called Do ;

There were Do-a, Do-ee, and other Do-s

And Uncle Dick and Uncle Wiz had come to stay with
them

(Nobody slept that night).

Now Do-a loved to bathe before his breakfast

With Uncle Dick, but Uncle Wiz . . .

Well ?

As a matter of fact the farm was in Pembrokeshire,

The week the Labour Cabinet resigned.

Dick had returned from Germany in love.

I hate cold water and am very fond of potatoes.

You're wondering about these scratches ? ”¹

“ To him [viz., apparently, the enemy] glory is only a reversal of rôle—the rejected lover's phantasy—to be cold and to be desired, *e.g.*, the Mimosa's affair with the parachute-jumper.”

“ 26th. . . .

¹ p. 66.

Read Mifflin on Air Currents.

A complete course for the commercial flying licence.

The Life of Count Zeppelin (obtainable in Air and Airways Library).

Remember to pay Brydon's Bill.

To answer C.'s letter.

The £100 for Tom's holiday."

These extracts give some idea of the general character and of the literary quality of Book II., and some idea of the difficulty of understanding it. A few of the references in the passages here quoted might be supplemented by like references elsewhere in the Book, and images and thoughts that surprise when detached do not seem so extraordinary when read in their chaotic surroundings; but these extracts give a fair idea of the difficulty of the Book.

Finally, Book III. consists of Six *Odes*, each in itself intelligible, but difficult to connect in virtue of anything except an identical tone of feeling, with each other or with the rest of the work.

The following,¹ from the *Ode to My Pupils*, is an average specimen, both of the direct and colloquial manner of using words that is characteristic of Mr. Auden, and of the tone of feeling to express which seems the only single purpose that can be said to run through the book :

¹ p. 109.

You've got their names to live up to, and questions
won't help,

You've a very full programme, first aid, gunnery,
tactics,

The technique to master of raids and hand-to-hand
fighting,

Are you in training?

Are you taking care of yourself? are you sure of
passing

The endurance test?

Or again—a passage typical of Mr. Auden both
as a poet and as a political thinker :

The gauche and the lonely he will introduce of course
To the smaller group, the right field of force ;
The few shall be taught who want to understand,
Most of the rest shall love upon the land ;
Living in one place with a satisfied face
All of the women and most of the men
Shall work with their hands and not think again.¹

Sometimes, as in his ode praising a Rugby XV.,
Mr. Auden's models (to quote Mrs. Mitchison again)
are "Aeschylus and that lot" ; sometimes his spirit
of revolt against existing convention and authority
brings him nearer to Mr. A. P. Herbert :

Go south, lovey, south by the Royal Scot,
Or hike if you like it, or hire a Ford.
But however you travel, be careful not

¹ p. 105.

To offend County Council or Fisheries Board,
From the Clyde to the Thames, where the punts
are moored.

This summary conveys a fair idea of the scope and content of the book, and of its literary quality. That it is a "difficult" poem, if we look at it as a whole (which we are asked to do) is fairly clear. That much its admirers admit. Exactly what sort of difficulty prevents the reader from understanding it it is a little hard to say. It has been suggested that it is a poem that frankly abandons intelligibility, a pageant of images and ideas: "It is quite definitely not a book to be apprehended intellectually . . . It isn't difficult in any logical way which a University training would overcome. Read it as passively as possible, just as a body sensitized to words, without letting intellect interfere . . . Don't bother to think at first, just listen. Then it will all begin to stand out like the red cliffs of Parnassos."¹ That is one view; yet the very critic who advances it says in the course of the same review that there are "political implications throughout the book" and that "it would have been very much kinder if Auden had thrown us an occasional clue" to his meaning.

The latter view of its difficulty seems the right one: the book is difficult, whether we read it as a whole or not, by reason of the private associations,

¹ Mrs. G. R. Mitchison, *The Week-End Review*, May 28, 1932.

the personal references, the esoteric jokes—some of them intelligible, as a judicious critic points out,¹ only to the author's friends, others only to the author himself. These obscure an intelligible content to which the various parts seem to have a claim. But that the whole is intelligible as the expression of a single "theme or purpose" it seems impossible to say. The thing is rather a scrap-book, which, by means of the scraps chosen, and their (un-logical) arrangement is meant, somewhat after the manner of *The Waste Land*, to give a picture of a certain attitude to life. It suffers, therefore, from the obscurity of its plan—and the difficulty here is of a sort that is not intellectual—and from the purely intellectual difficulties of the parts that make up the whole.

No attempt will be made here to estimate the quality of Mr. Auden as a writer ; all that is relevant to this essay is to gauge the effect upon his work of the theories that are the subject of this book. And it is worth consideration that a poet of the calibre of which Mr. Auden's admirers believe him to be—a clever mind, a dexterous and subtle artist in words, a sensitive and ardent spirit (all these claims are made on his behalf)—should produce a work in which no single intelligible purpose is to be discerned—a jumble of images and jottings seeking to express a

¹ Mr. John Hayward, *The Criterion*, Oct. 1932.

consciousness, in which personal associations play so predominant a part that the writer's literary merits have no range in which they can be displayed, and his work, whether it be looked upon as a poem or a pamphlet, can only be appreciated by those who are determined at all costs to admire something so conscientiously "modern" in spirit, and so obviously dictated by a serious moral purpose.

If Mr. Auden had not felt that it is the poet's duty to be "modern," he would probably not have spent so much of his book in political and social propaganda, in describing aeroplanes and an impending revolution, in "recreating D. H. Lawrence"; if he had not been influenced by the prevalent view that it is the artist's business to expose himself in public, he would not have chosen this half scrap-book, half diary, form, lacking the unity of an intellectual structure; and if he had not before him so many examples of the pursuit of pure suggestion, he would not have allowed unintelligible connections, often due to entirely personal association, to dominate his work so that three-quarters of it must be lost upon three-quarters of even his most sympathetic readers.

Free from these influences, perhaps Mr. Auden would have produced a book that was beautiful and moving, and could have been understood.

As it is, his work is a monument to the misguided

aims that prevail among contemporary poets, and the fact that on the strength of this and similar performances he is hailed as "a master" shows how criticism is helping poetry on the downward path.

POSTSCRIPT

THESE essays were written more than a year ago ; in the meantime two of them (IV and V) have appeared in an abridged form in *Life and Letters* ; I must thank Mr. Desmond MacCarthy for permission to reprint them. Since the book was finished, I have found some of my views expressed better than I have here expressed them in Mr. Max Eastman's *The Literary Mind* and Mr. F. L. Lucas' Warton Lecture for 1933—the one a most trenchant and amusing examination of modern aberrations in literature ; the other a sane and lucid comparison of present-day criticism with that of the past. Much of the ground covered by these essays is also touched upon in Mr. Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, my indebtedness to which will be obvious to those who have read it. My own analysis, deliberately pedestrian and detached, is so different in character from these that I have not altered some passages which might seem plagiarisms. If it contains any clear or close thinking, that is due to Mr. H. W. B. Joseph more than any other person, and I should like here to acknowledge both a general and a particular indebtedness to him.

