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PREFACE

I HAVE chosen the dialogue form because it appears to me the liveliest and most convenient way of presenting a controversial subject. Any one who considers modern poetry will be aware that an argument is proceeding in his own head. This dialogue is the overhearing of such an argument, the presentation of several conflicting but not unrelated points of view.

Following the example of Mr. T. S. Eliot's *Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry*, I have named the speakers only by letters. The four chief speakers are:

P. the plain man or perplexed common reader;
A. who attacks modern poetry;
D. who defends it; and
M. the man in the middle, the moderator, who conducts the argument and expounds principles.

B. and *C.* are minor characters and may be thought to be unnecessary, but they are useful to preserve enough conversational suppleness to prevent the dialogue from stiffening into a debate. *B.* will be found generally on the side of the attack on modern poetry, *C.* on the side of the defence.

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POEMS by the following authors are included by permission of the copyright owners whose names are given in parentheses:

W. H. Auden, 'Sir, no man's enemy' (the author, and Messrs. Faber & Faber), 'Song for the New Year' (the author, and the Literary Editor of *The Listener*); Robert Bridges, 'Nightingales' from *Shorter Poems* (the executors); Edmund Blunden (the author, and Messrs. R. Cobden-Sanderson); Richard Eberhart (Messrs. Chatto & Windus); T. S. Eliot (from *Collected Poems 1909–1925*, Messrs. Faber & Faber); G. M. Hopkins (the personal representatives); A. E. Housman (Messrs. James B. Pinker & Son); D. H. Lawrence (Messrs. Pearn, Pollinger, & Higham); Louis Macneice (Messrs. Faber & Faber); Edward Thomas (Messrs. Selwyn & Blount); W. B. Yeats (from *Collected Poems*, published by Messrs. Macmillan & Co.; Mrs. Yeats).

I

C. We have been arguing about modern poetry, M., and I think you ought to take a hand. So far, there is a nice conflict and confusion of opinion. A. says that the new poets have imposed themselves, by accident mixed with cleverness, on a small and gullible public, D. that poetry is healthier now than it has been for the last hundred years.

M. What do you say yourself? And B., and P.?

C. B. and I are moderates, and have not said much, but he has shown sympathy with the attack and I with the defence. P. has, I think, been silent.

P. From bewilderment.

M. If we are to argue it out we must take some precautions or the wind of the argument will carry us into the trackless deeps. I propose this at any rate: avoid unsupported generalizations, quoting wherever possible. I have got most of the books.

All. Agreed.

M. Shall we make A. begin?

Horror and scorn and hate and fear and indignation—
I see them burning in his eye. He had better fire off.

A. I don't know about fear. But I remember that Coleridge says that 'in all perplexity there is a portion of fear, which predisposes the mind to anger'. I make a present of this to D. and the new poets. It is a good weapon for them. When P. and I complain of perplexity they can reply

that we are suffering from anger induced by fear. It is the retort psychological, neatly calculated both to exasperate and to paralyse.

B. I don't want to interrupt, but I think we are beginning in the wrong way. P. says he is bewildered. I suggest that we should postpone A.'s attack and D.'s defence, and begin with P.'s bewilderment. We ought to clear the ground before we have a duel between A. and D. There are questions that need to be asked, and P. will ask them.

A. I am perfectly ready to postpone the attack.

M. I believe B. is right. Will you begin, P.? Will you ask the necessary questions?

P. I have some questions to ask and should like to ask them. If you think them necessary, so much the better. But they will be the most obvious, simple-minded questions. When I listen to any of you talking about modern poetry I feel that I must be an idiot. You don't all like it, some of you criticize it severely, but you all appear to understand it. Now I don't understand it even enough to criticize it. I have done my best, I consider, and have tried to read several books of poems, Auden and Spender and Day Lewis, and one or two anthologies. When there is a modern poem in *The Listener* I have a shot at it. Occasionally I can understand, and then I am thankful, although, when you come to think of it, this in itself is not much to be thankful for. But more often I feel that I am standing on one side of a ravine and the poet on the other. I see him gesticulating and hear him shouting.

I can see that he is very much in earnest, but I can't hear what he says. The noise he makes seems to me unpleasant, and his gestures, at this distance, are ridiculous. What can I do, but shrug my shoulders and turn away?

M. Give us an example, P.

P. I will. When I talk to admirers of Auden they nearly always say: What about *Sir, no man's enemy*? This seems to be a popular poem. I have read it several times and I don't understand it. But if I say that to his admirers they shake their heads and give me up for lost. Here it is. I shall not be able to do it justice, so D. had better read it out.

D. reads:

Sir, no man's enemy, forgiving all
But will his negative inversion, be prodigal:
Send to us power and light, a sovereign touch
Curing the intolerable neural itch,
The exhaustion of weaning, the liar's quinsy,
And the distortions of ingrown virginity.
Prohibit sharply the rehearsed response
And gradually correct the coward's stance;
Cover in time with beams those in retreat
That, spotted, they turn though the reverse were great;
Publish each healer that in city lives
Or country houses at the end of drives;
Harrow the house of the dead; look shining at
New styles of architecture, a change of heart.

P. Well, here are the stupid questions I want to ask. First, who is the poem addressed to? Who is 'Sir'? God, or man? A prayer to God or an exhortation to Man in

general? As I don't suppose Auden believes in God, and as he is much given to exhortation, I incline to think it must be addressed to Man. Next, 'will his negative inversion'—what does this mean? Does 'his' mean 'its', that is 'will's'? If so, why say 'his'? The next seven, no, nine lines, I can't understand at all. Who are these people, these sufferers from itching and 'the exhaustion of weaning', these liars and virgins and cowards and fugitives? Why do the healers live in country houses at the end of drives? I want to know this particularly. I have a notion that they may be psychologists, but I'm not sure how the poet means me to regard them. Has 'publish' a favourable or an unfavourable sense? Are they bogus —or perhaps bourgeois—healers? What kind of a healer ought I to expect to find in a country house at the end of a drive? I really can't imagine. Finally, I don't understand the last two lines about 'the house of the dead' and 'new styles of architecture'.

C. P.'s simple-minded questions are not at all simple-minded. They seem to be extremely artful, and in any case unfair. No poem can stand up to this sort of inquisition. And the reader will get nothing out of any poem if he approaches it in this way, eager to catch the poet out at every turn.

P. I am sorry if I gave that impression. I was enticed into a little levity, but I seriously agree that one should approach poetry in the most receptive spirit possible, without any prejudice or assertiveness. But after this has been done, it may be necessary to ask questions.

M. Yes, and if, after due consideration, you cannot find an answer, you may fairly put that down, at least for the time being, to the poem's discredit. For the time being only, for a year later, perhaps, you may read the poem again and find that you can understand it. As to P.'s questions about this poem, I think some of them can be answered. The poem is not an exhortation to Man. It is a prayer for 'power and light'. You may say, if you like, that it is a prayer to God. But the atheist and the theist will read it differently, and both will be right. *Sir, no man's enemy* perhaps shows a recollection of Hopkins's sonnet, a prayer to God which begins:

> Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
> With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just,

and contains the line:

> Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend.

P. But I object to this allusiveness. Why, in order to understand a poem of Auden's, should I be required to have read a sonnet of Hopkins? I haven't read the sonnet, and a great many ordinary readers must be in the same position. When the modern poets make this sort of allusion they are writing simply for themselves and their friends, for the people who have lately 'discovered' Hopkins and have their heads full of him. Poets who write like this are cutting their own throats. They make the ordinary reader feel out of it; and if the poet does that the ordinary reader will stay outside, and the poet won't be read; that is, he'll be read only by his friends, by the initiates who can take the allusion to Hopkins's sonnet.

A. Hear, hear.

M. Steady on, P. I wish I'd never pointed out the allusion. I did not mean to imply that to understand Auden's poem you must have read Hopkins's sonnet. If you recognize the allusion, so much the better. But the purpose of the poem is not bound up with the allusion. Would you agree with that, D.?

D. Yes. I don't think it matters much here whether you can recognize the allusion or not. But the general question of the use of allusion and quotation is important, and I cannot allow P.'s objections to pass unchallenged. I am prepared to maintain that the use of allusion and quotation in modern poetry is justifiable, even laudable.

A. And I am ready to maintain the opposite.

M. I suggest that we postpone the question for the present. Obviously we shall come back to it when A. and D. have their duel. But we have agreed that the reader of this poem of Auden's need not recognize the allusion to Hopkins. So that at the moment the general question does not arise. Can I go on with my attempts to answer P.'s questions about the meaning of the poem?

P. Yes. What about 'will his negative inversion'?

M. The meaning is certainly 'the negative inversion of the will'. I find no difficulty here and should not have thought of demanding a justification for 'his'. But if you want one I think I can give it. The negative inversion that cannot be forgiven is the negative inversion of the whole man, his turning away from, denial of, negation of, his own natural and positive good. To get this

meaning you need the personal 'his'. Because the will is the man the negative inversion of the will is 'his' negative inversion. Is this explanation any use?

P. Yes. It was stupid of me not to see that the poem was a prayer. I am not yet quite convinced about 'his', but I see your point.

M. Now I think D. might take on.

D. 'The negative inversion of the will' is a psychologist's phrase, and the lines about 'the intolerable neural itch', &c., refer to psychological diseases or ailments and their physical symptoms. If you look up the works of the psychologists—Homer Lane is the man by whom Auden is most influenced—you will find all you want to know, and more, about these matters. But you need not do that. The reader of the poem does not require any specialized psychological knowledge. He need only understand roughly what the poet is talking about: that he is referring, not to physical disease on the one hand, nor to lunacy on the other, but to psychological disorders common to us all, which can be cured by 'power and light'.

P. But I don't understand these psychological diseases and symptoms. The poet expects too much of me. It appears to me that he expects me to know, as a matter of common experience, that liars have sore throats and that cowards can be recognized by the way they stand. Now I don't know this, and I even find it hard willingly to suspend my disbelief of it.

M. Try again, P. You should think of the White Queen

and practise believing impossible things before breakfast. Seriously, I think you are in the wrong here. You are not required to believe that liars have sore throats or that cowards can be recognized by the way they stand, though you may believe it if you like. You are only required to believe something much more credible: that we are all in need of 'power and light' to cure our psychological disorders. That you should be able to believe (or not for the moment to disbelieve), and when you have done this all the rest follows. The liar's quinsy and the coward's stance and the rest are merely illustrations, 'corroborative detail' if you like. They are there to drive home the moral; this is an extremely moral poem—hence its popularity; if you can accept the general principle of the poem, as you ought to be able to do, there will be no difficulty about the illustrations of it.

P. Well, you may be right. I suspend judgement. But my last questions, about the healers at the end of drives, and about the last two lines, have still to be answered.

M. Isn't it your turn, C.?

C. No, I am not competent. At this point I might play into P.'s hands and support the wrong side by mistake.

M. Well, then, D., you must carry on. I can't answer the question about the healers.

D. Nor can I. I don't know what these two lines mean, except that I think 'publish' means 'expose'. I think it is Auden who has played into P.'s hands at this point, at least as far as intelligibility is concerned. There are other things to be considered in a poem, and from another

point of view I think that these are two very good lines, remarkably vivid and memorable. But at the moment we are concerned with intelligibility. As to the last two lines of the poem, I should not have thought them difficult. They could be paraphrased: Destroy what is dead and make it breed new life; prosper in us new ways of living, in different houses, with changed hearts.

M. What do you think of the poem now, P.? You complained that you did not understand and we have done our best to explain. Has it been any use? Do you like the poem any better?

P. I am very much obliged to you for your explanations, and of course I accept them, as far as my ignorance of psychology allows. You have made sense of the poem for me, a sort of sense, but, owing to this ignorance of mine, I cannot help finding it rather queer sense. As to *liking* the poem, I cannot do that yet. I may come to it in time.

M. We must leave it to time. But this one poem is hardly a sufficient target for questions. Can you provide us with another example, P., another modern poem which is generally admired and seems to you incomprehensible?

P. Yes, if you like I will set up a larger target. I can produce a much longer, and I suppose most people would say a much more important poem, T. S. Eliot's *Gerontion*. I can say nothing about it myself because I hardly understand a word of it. I can see that it is a poem about an unhappy

old man, but beyond that I cannot go. Is it too long to read out?

M. No. I think it a very good choice. D. will enjoy reading it out.

D. Certainly. It is a magnificent poem. How many of us know it already? M. of course has read it, and so I suppose has A.

A., M. Yes.

B. I haven't read it.

C. Nor have I.

D. Well, don't be prejudiced by what P. has said about its obscurity. It is difficult, but I believe that the unprejudiced reader finds it immediately impressive.

Reads:

GERONTION

Thou hast nor youth nor age
But as it were an after dinner sleep
Dreaming of both.

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought.
My house is a decayed house,
And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.
The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.

II

The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,
Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.
I an old man,
A dull head among windy spaces.

Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!'
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year,
Came Christ the tiger

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,
To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
Among whispers; by Mr. Silvero
With caressing hands, at Limoges
Who walked all night in the next room;
By Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians;
By Madame de Tornquist, in the dark room
Shifting the candles; Fräulein von Kulp
Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door. Vacant shuttles
Weave the wind. I have no ghosts,
An old man in a draughty house
Under a windy knob.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late
What's not believed in, or if still believed,
In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon
Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with
Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices

Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.

The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours.
    Think at last
We have not reached conclusion, when I
Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last
I have not made this show purposelessly
And it is not by any concitation
Of the backward devils.
I would meet you upon this honestly.
I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
How should I use them for your closer contact?

These with a thousand small deliberations
Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,
Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,
With pungent sauces, multiply variety
In a wilderness of mirrors. What will the spider do,
Suspend its operations, will the weevil
Delay? De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled
Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear
In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits
Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn,
White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims,
And an old man driven by the Trades
To a sleepy corner.
                Tenants of the house,
Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.

M. Do you admit that the poem is impressive, P.?

P. I don't know.

C. It seems to me extremely impressive. And I should say that P. had exaggerated its obscurity. At least I think I can understand something more than that it is a poem about an unhappy old man.

P. Well, I suppose it is impressive, in a way; and perhaps I understood rather more than I admitted. But if you grant all this, what follows? The poem is certainly very obscure. I have only a glimmering of its meaning. And the impressiveness that you talk about may be a mere trick, an illusion, a cheat.

M. Have you tried hard to make sense of the poem?

P. No, I can't say that I have tried *hard*. But why should I? That is a question which nobody seems to consider. Here am I, an ordinary reader with a liking for poetry. If I want to read poetry I can take down Shakespeare or Milton from the shelves. I know what I shall get from them, and I know that it is what I want. Why, then, should I spend time and trouble on a difficult and possibly worthless modern poet? Highbrows have, I suppose, a sort of innate conviction that the reading of modern poetry, however difficult, is a Good Thing. But you can't expect me to feel like that. If I am to take a great deal of trouble, to work my way through a forest of difficulty, I must be given a guarantee that it will be worth my while.

M. A guarantee? A guarantee that the poem is worth

reading? A hall-mark to show you that, in spite of appearances, it really is a good poem?

P. Well, guarantee is not the right word. But I must have some assurance, some encouragement, something to make me want to go on.

M. I entirely agree with you, and it is an important point. I agree that the poet must give the reader something immediately, at the first reading, to make him feel that it is worth his while to take further trouble about the poem. But this something cannot be a guarantee. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the proof of the poem is in the reading, not the first hasty reading but the reading which is a full experience. If the pudding smells good you will want to eat it, and I agree that the poem must have something about it to make the reader want to know more, to go beyond a first reading. Now in this poem of Eliot's I think the reader is given something at once, at the first go off.

P. What?

M. The impressiveness which even you have admitted. I suggest that the reader of this poem is at once aware of two qualities: its power and its precision. He may understand only that it is a poem about an unhappy old man, and yet be clearly aware of two things: that the poet is hitting hard and that he is hitting the nail on the head. I think C. will bear me out in this?

C. Yes, certainly.

M. This, I suggest, is what the reader is given at the first go

off, and this should be enough to make him want to know more, to take further trouble about the poem.

B. But, as P. said just now, this impressiveness may be a sham. How are we to know whether to trust it or not?

M. You don't know and you can't know. You must take a risk, as the eater of the pudding takes a risk. It may smell good, and yet be a bad pudding after all. So the poem may seem impressive—you may think it powerful and precise—and yet it may turn out to be worthless. If you hang back and refuse to take a risk you will starve: no pudding and no poetry.

P. Very well. I will take a risk and make an effort to understand. May I ask my first question? Who is the old man? Is he simply an old man, or does he represent or symbolize something?

M. I think I can answer this first question, but after that D. must undertake the work of elucidation. The old man is a dying civilization, *our* civilization, which is, in the poet's view, contemptible, pitiful, justly doomed. The title, *Gerontion*, which means 'a little old man', strikes at once the note between contempt and pity which is one of the notes of the poem. There are others, disgust or horror, despair, warning, awe, and exultation. The quotation from *Measure for Measure* at the beginning of the poem is another pointer to its general meaning. The lines are from the Duke's speech to Claudio about life and death. Why should you fear to die, he has been saying, when life is so little worth keeping? It is not noble nor valiant nor happy nor rich; it cannot—and

these are the lines quoted—even grasp the present reality but is passed in a dream, youth dreaming of age and age of youth.

> Thou hast nor youth nor age
> But as it were an after dinner sleep
> Dreaming of both.

There is a close analogy between the feeling in these lines, their contempt, pity and despair, and the feeling in Eliot's poem: life is worthless, why should Claudio fear to die? Our civilization deserves to be destroyed, why should we wish to save it?

D. Yes. The general likeness between the feeling in the *Measure for Measure* lines and the feeling in *Gerontion* is obvious. But there is also some closer likeness which I can only feel after and can't formulate. It turns on the words 'Thou hast nor youth nor age' and 'an after dinner sleep'. The whole poem is a vision, a show—'I have not made this show purposelessly'—seen in civilization's after dinner sleep; and Gerontion himself, the little old man, is neither old nor young. He is blind, like Tiresias, the central figure in *The Waste Land*, and perhaps, like Tiresias, he remembers everything and foresees everything, and in this sense stands outside time. I think there is a close connexion between Gerontion, Tiresias, and Simeon in *A Song for Simeon*, the old prophet who says:

I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me,
I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me.

M. I think that is as much as we can do by way of preliminary explanation.

P. May I now ask some more detailed questions?

M. I suggest that D. should go through the poem slowly, giving a running commentary or even a paraphrase, and answering questions. I don't think this will be tedious, for I believe that a poem of this kind repays the most detailed examination. What do you all think?

P. As long as I have full freedom of interruption I am content.

A. I shall listen with great interest.

C. So shall I.

B. Don't you think the poem will suffer from being pulled to pieces in this way?

M. Certainly not. The notion that a poem must not be scrutinized, that if you look at it too closely it will fade away, is nonsensical and produces bad writing and bad reading. A good poem improves under examination. The closer the scrutiny the better for the poem and for the reader. A paraphrase is valuable because it clears the reader's mind, shows him what he has understood and what he has not. But of course it must be remembered that a paraphrase of a poem cannot be in any sense its equivalent. The poetry is in the words of the poem and cannot be 'put into' any other words. There are things in a poem that can be explained and things that cannot, and the things that can be explained are capable of a paraphrase.

D. I agree with M. The exercise of answering questions about a poem, or paraphrasing it, is an illuminating one.

You can learn a great deal from it. That is why I am willing to stand up to be fired at by P. But before we begin I want to emphasize what M. has just said: that a paraphrase of a poem cannot be in any way its equivalent. M. said that there are things in a poem that can be explained and things that cannot. I wish to add that the things that cannot be explained (but can of course be understood) are much the more important.

P. Things that can be understood but can't be explained? What do you mean?

D. I mean the things that can be understood by the reader but can't be explained by the critic, the things that will slip through the mesh of any paraphrase. By 'understanding' I don't mean intellectual understanding. It is important to remember that the activity of the reader is one thing and the activity of the critic is another. The reader's business is to understand the poem: that is, to 'take it in', to receive it, to share the poet's experience, to stand where he stood, to see what he saw. This is one thing. It is the first stage, and is of primary importance. When the reader begins to reflect on his experience, to analyse, to explain, to ask and answer questions, he has become a critic. This is a different activity, and is mainly intellectual. It is of secondary importance. The reader's understanding, or, if you like, his *enjoyment* of the poem comes first and is primary.

P. But here are we, trying to criticize, asking and answering questions, before we have passed through what you call the first stage. At least I haven't understood or enjoyed

Gerontion, I am sure of that. Aren't we putting the cart before the horse?

D. No, because the end of this process returns to its beginning. The reader's enjoyment or *experience* of the poem is of ultimate as well as of primary importance: it is here that the process begins and ends. The reader first turns critic, and then the critic—in order to make use of what he has learned through criticism—must turn back into a reader. The purpose of criticism is to make a fuller experience of the poem possible. It is one thing to experience a poem and another thing to criticize it. The two activities serve each other but they remain separate, and one is primary and ultimate, the other subordinate. The greater includes the less. The reader can take up into his experience of the poem all that he has learnt through criticism, but criticism cannot retain the whole experience of the reader. Criticism can deal only with what can be explained; and what can be explained is not the whole poem. But the reader can experience the whole poem.

M. Are you satisfied, P.? Does that answer your question about the things that can be understood (that is, experienced), but not explained?

P. Yes. I am now impatient to hear D. explain as much of *Gerontion* as can be explained. Will you begin your paraphrase?

D. The poem is divided by spaces, pauses. I will go as far as the first pause, to begin with, and P. can interrupt as he feels inclined. I shall not feel bound to avoid the

poet's own words, provided that the sense seems to me clear.

'Here I am, a blind old man in a time of drought, waiting for rain. I have no heroic memories; I have not fought, suffered, ventured.'

P. But what is all this about the hot gates and the warm rain and the salt marsh?

D. 'The hot gates' is of course a literal translation of Thermopylae. What the other two battles are, in the warm rain and in the salt marsh, I don't know, and I don't think it much matters, as it doesn't much matter if the reader has no Greek and can't recognize 'the hot gates'. But if you do recognize Thermopylae you will conclude, as I do, that the other two battles are also between the civilized and the barbarians. I think the general meaning of the passage is clear.

P. When was this poem written?

D. It was published in 1920.

P. Just after the War, in which the civilization which you say the old man represents had suffered, fought, ventured on an unparalleled scale. Isn't it surprising that the poet should apparently ignore the War?

D. No, I don't think he ignores the War. On the contrary, I think the whole poem springs out of the War. But in 1920 the memories of the War were not heroic memories. They were not in any way to be compared with the memory of Thermopylae. To Eliot and to many others such a comparison would be a hideous blasphemy. The War was not a defeat of the barbarians by the civi-

lized; it was an exposure of the rottenness of European civilization, a defeat of civilization by itself. The next lines enforce this idea. Their general meaning is that the civilization for which the Greeks fought, which we have inherited from them, has become in our hands decrepit, abject, squalid, has lost its character, has become enslaved. The house of civilization is decayed, and is not even its own; the jew owns it, squats on its window-sill, darkens it. Like its owner this civilization is international and belongs nowhere; it has been knocked about from place to place, it is falling to pieces.

P. I am perplexed about these two lines:

Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.

The first seems to refer to the jew, the second to the old man's house.

D. Yes. The poet runs together the two ideas, of the house and of the jew who owns it. This sort of vehement ellipsis is necessary when a complex of ideas or attitudes is held together and driven forward by a strong emotion. It marks the union of passion and complexity, a union which was once not infrequent in English poetry, and in the last two centuries has almost disappeared. When this passion and complexity is recovered by a poet like Eliot the reader is unprepared for it, and stumbles where there should be no obstacle. In these two lines the poet has several things to say and has to say them with the utmost force, rapidity, and intensity. The jew is international, the scum of Europe and its landlord; and the house which

he owns, the house of European civilization, is international too; it belongs everywhere and nowhere; in Brussels or in London it is the same: decaying, blistered, patched, and peeled.

In the next lines the situation is further particularized. In the field above the house is the goat, the symbol of lust; about the house is the barrenness of rocks, the useless growth of moss and stonecrop, iron, by which I understand the litter of a mechanical civilization, and filth.

P. Merds? What exactly does that mean? I don't know the word.

D. Pieces of excrement. It is an old word, you will find it in Ben Jonson.

B. How disgusting these poets are.

D. Yes, when they wish to express disgust.

P. And the next lines, about the woman in the kitchen?

D. She lives a narrow, dejected, and resentful life. 'Peevish' is the operative word.

P. But who is she?

D. Well, who is the old man? I suppose civilization is not entirely masculine. She leads the life that women do lead in our civilization. In the next lines we return to the old man, 'A dull head among windy spaces', that is, he has lost his bearings and he cannot think; he is buffeted, stupefied by the winds blowing from the spaces outside his world.

This brings us to the first pause in the poem. Shall I go on?

M. Yes.

D. 'Signs are wondered at, not understood. They asked for a sign, and the sign came, the *verbum infans*, the sign wrapped in darkness. In the youth of our civilization, the beginning of its year, came Christ the tiger.' There is no stop here, although there is a pause, marked by a space; the sense goes straight on.

P. Yes, but you must stop and explain. First, what is the connexion of all this with what went before, with the old man?

D. The poem begins with the present state of our civilization, figured as an old man in a decaying house. Now we look back to its youth, to the coming of Christ in the juvescence of its year.

'The word within a word, unable to speak a word', is a quotation from Lancelot Andrewes: 'What, *Verbum infans*, the Word an infant? The Word and not be able to speak a word?' You will find the passage quoted in Eliot's essay on Andrewes; and this idea of the *verbum infans*, the unspeaking Word, is often in Eliot's mind and recurs in other poems: in *Ash Wednesday* and in *A Song for Simeon*.

The *verbum infans* is Christ the tiger. We come now to a highly compressed and disputable part of the poem, and I must make a few preliminary remarks. This poem is a vision, a show, an allegory. Eliot is using the method of Dante; and in this method it is the business of the poet to *show*, and of the reader to *see*, to look at what is shown. It is not the business of the poet to explain, nor of the reader to ask questions. Inquiry and explanation

are different matters and can be left to the critic. At the beginning of the *Inferno*, for instance, Dante shows the reader a Leopard, a Lion, and a She-wolf. It is the business of the reader to look at them, and by looking to share the state of mind of which they are the natural and necessary expression: he must stand where the poet stood, see what he saw. But in doing this the reader will be aware that these images have a meaning beyond their surface meaning: that the leopard is not simply a leopard, nor the lion simply a lion. It is necessary that the reader should be aware that the images have a meaning; but it is not necessary that he should be aware what that meaning is. As Eliot says in his essay on Dante, the intensity of the image comes from the fact that they have a meaning; and 'we do not need to know what that meaning is, but in our awareness of the images we must be aware that the meaning is there too'.

So much for the reader. It is not his business to ask questions and all that he needs to know is that the images have a meaning. But if he turns critic it is his business to ask questions. Can he now discover what the meaning of the images is? The answer depends on the purpose of the poet. The critic's explanation will be useful if it discovers something which the poet has intended to be discovered. If the poet has left a clue (such as 'the hot gates' in *Gerontion*) it is obvious that he means it to be picked up——

P. But you said just now that it did not matter if the reader knew no Greek and couldn't recognize Thermopylae.

D. It doesn't matter, in the sense that it is not *necessary* to

recognize Thermopylae. The reader can go forward without this piece of knowledge. He can share the poet's feeling, stand beside him and see these battles as he sees them. But the clue is there, and if he can pick it up for himself, or if criticism points it out to him, he has gained something, a fuller understanding of the poem. Criticism has given him something which he can take up into his experience of the poem.

But sometimes there is no clue, and then the critics can only speculate, and these speculations will not be of much importance. I shall be driven into speculation about *Gerontion*, either by the necessity of the case, or by P.'s importunity. But such speculations must be distinguished from *explanations*, which discover what the poet has meant to be discovered, which make explicit what is implicit in the words of the poem.

A. I hope D. is not trying to shirk. I think myself that his task of explaining *Gerontion* is an impossible one, and I half suspect that this digression about Dante and the three beasts, and the limitations of the critic, is an attempt at evasion, a 'cunning passage', a 'contrived corridor', as the poet says a little further on.

D. No. I am not trying to shirk. The digression was necessary in order to emphasize three points: that the poem is an allegory, and therefore uses images which have a meaning beyond their surface meaning; that it is necessary for the reader to be aware that this further meaning is present in the images; but that it is not necessary, and is sometimes impossible, for him to be sure what that meaning is.

A. I object strongly to this doctrine. I suppose I must not hold up D.'s discourse at this point, but I cannot refrain from interjecting a protest.

M. Very well. Having so far relieved your mind, let D. proceed.

D. I will go now as far as the next pause. From the juvescence of the year, the time of the coming of Christ, we pass to its May, its time of flowering and betrayal—note the flowering *judas*—when Christ the tiger is eaten, divided, drunk among whispers; by Mr. Silvero, by Hakagawa, by Madame de Tornquist, by Fräulein von Kulp, four figures, in whom the present state of our civilization is summed up and pilloried. In the preceding lines we have had the *verbum infans*, the infant Logos, the yet unspoken Word of God (compare 'the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word', in *A Song for Simeon*) swaddled with darkness, hidden in the form of a child. This is Christ the tiger, the yet undeclared power and terror of God. The Word is still unspoken: the tiger has not yet sprung. In depraved May Christ the tiger is betrayed to be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk. Clearly we are meant to think of a sacrament misused; and perhaps also of the eating and drinking of a wild animal by savages, in order to secure for themselves, to absorb into themselves, its strength and fierceness. You observe the emphatic '*to be* eaten, *to be* divided, *to be* drunk'; this has the force of indignation and despair: was it for this that Christ the tiger came? And you observe the emphatic position of the words 'to be divided'.

Further, you notice an unexpressed transition in time, from 'depraved May', which is certainly in the past, to the present time of Mr. Silvero and the others. It is unexpressed because the two times are seen as one: the eating, dividing, drinking, happened then and is happening now. Next we come to the four figures. Mr. Silvero has caressing hands, and at Limoges he walked all night in the next room. Clearly we are meant to think of Limoges enamels. He is, if you like, the unsatisfied and uncomprehending collector. His name is Italian, and not Italian. I take him for an American of the international or nationless kind, rich, rootless, vagrant. He returns from the western fringe of our civilization to its centre, to caress, to admire from the outside the works of art of its prime. He is the outsider from the West. Hakagawa, the Japanese gentleman bowing among the Titians, is the outsider from the East, from the eastern nation which deliberately adopted the debased modern civilization of the West. Mr. Silvero and Hakagawa are admiring from the outside, from a distance, without comprehension, the products of the flowering time of our civilization. Next we turn from the outsiders to the Europeans themselves, the old French and German (or Austrian) families, the aristocrats, Madame de Tornquist and Fräulein von Kulp. Madame de Tornquist is, I think, sunk in the old life, imprisoned; she cannot get out, she can only shift the candles in the dark room. Fräulein von Kulp is young and is hesitating between the old life and the new.

Vacant shuttles
Weave the wind.

The old man's memory runs to and fro and brings nothing back. No life comes back to our civilization from its past. No ghosts return to the old man, shivering in a decayed house that lets in the wind.

P. You said that 'depraved May' was some time in the past. May I ask what time? Is this a matter for explanation or only for speculation?

D. It is a matter for speculation. My own speculation would be that 'depraved May' is the Renaissance, considered as the end of faith and unity, the beginning of secularism and individualism, of the age of Mr. Silvero and the others, of our modern civilization, the age of division, drought, decay. The eating, *dividing*, drinking of Christ the tiger is then taken to mean secularism and individualism, the secularizing and disintegration of what was once a Christian civilization and a unity, and the claim by the individual to choose for himself, to take for himself; the germ of Protestantism, of what Eliot sometimes calls Whiggery, and of commercialism. Christ the *tiger* is eaten, divided, drunk: a Christian civilization disregards the power and terror of God, and the individual pursues his own advantage. This individualism and secularism begins in defiance and exuberance—in 'depraved May'—but it ends in aimlessness, boredom, frustration. 'Vacant shuttles weave the wind.' Our civilization is unproductive. The shuttles are empty.

P. This is a most melancholy, defeatist poem. Why you should call it 'magnificent' I can't imagine.

M. I agree with D. that it is a magnificent poem. But we

cannot argue about that at the moment. Let him finish his elucidation.

D. I think I had better take a long breath and go on to the end of the poem. The next passage is mainly argument or statement.

'Our civilization has known the truth and has not followed it: how then can we be forgiven? We follow our own ambitions and vanities, and the course of history cheats us, makes fools of us. She offers us a gift, but we are looking the other way; we take it, and are not satisfied but starved; it comes too late, when we no longer believe in it or desire it; too soon, when we cannot hold it, when we think we can do without it, and so refuse it and afterwards fear it. Both fear and courage betray us to their opposites. Heroic virtue produces unnatural vice; reckless vice flings us back to virtue. These tears fall from the tree of knowledge, whose fruit is wrath.'

In the next passage we come to the wrath, the doom.

'Our year is over and in the new year of the world the tiger springs. Christ destroys us. This is not the end, my dying slowly in a house that is not my own. I (the poet) have not made this show purposelessly, nor am I instigated by the devils who turn our eyes towards the past. I look forward and expect the end.'

I must break off here because I have no satisfactory explanation of the next seven lines. I can only understand the general drift of the passage: that it is an expostulation with an objector who protests against the doom of our civilization; to which the reply is that the end is inevitable, that what is to be destroyed is not worth

preserving, that our civilization has lost its passion, even its senses. But I want to know more than this. I want to know who 'you' is, and what these two lines mean:

> I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
> To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.

Can you elucidate, M.?

M. No. Except that I think 'inquisition' means inquiry. Our urbanized civilization has lost its senses; but it can still inquire. In science, and only in science, we are still alive, active, successful.

D. Yes, and this thought is carried on in the next passage. The old man's sense has cooled, but he is still capable of endless 'small deliberations', endless reflections, 'a wilderness of mirrors'. But destruction will not delay for this: the spider will spin its webs, the beetle will devour the grain. Civilization will disintegrate, the civilized will be blown beyond the stars. The gull that flew against the wind falls into the snow, and an old man is driven by the trade winds into a sleepy corner.

> Tenants of the house,
> Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.

M. Well, P., what are your final questions?

P. Who are de Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel?

D. Any one you like. It doesn't matter. 'The shuddering Bear' is a recollection of some lines of Chapman's:

> Fly where men feel
> The burning axletree, and those that suffer
> Beneath the chariot of the snowy Bear,

and Eliot points out somewhere that Chapman himself

borrowed here from Seneca. Not that this matters, either. 'The snowy Bear' has been well digested and is put to a completely new use. I only mention it as a literary curiosity, and because it is a small instance of Eliot's huge powers of assimilation.

P. Then the whirling of de Bailhache and Co. beyond the stars is the end of our civilization?

D. Yes. In this last passage the poet is modulating through various keys: from exultation in doom to pity, acceptance of defeat, sadness, and at last calm.

P. What about the gull against the wind? Where is Belle Isle?

D. The straits of Belle Isle are, I think, between Newfoundland and Canada. You can make what you like of that. The gull is flying westward, against the wind, near the northern arctic; or else he is being blown on the Horn, in the extreme south. But southward or northward he falls into the snow. He is blown beyond the warm zone, the limits of civilized life. But the old man is driven by the Trades into the Doldrums, the sleepy corner; and with these words the vision ends. It has been a dream of civilization's after dinner sleep, a dream of youth and age, of the beginning and the end.

M. I think it is time for a pause, an adjournment. After that P. can continue his questions, if he likes, or else we can have A.'s attack on the modern poets.

II

M. Well, P., have you any more questions?

P. Yes. You agreed with D. that *Gerontion* is a magnificent poem. Now I should like to know exactly what you mean by that.

D. P. is a very moderate man. He asks the most difficult question in all criticism, and seems to expect the answer to be handed across the counter like a packet of pins.

P. The simple-minded always ask the most difficult questions. It is their duty and privilege.

M. I don't object to P.'s question, and I think an attempt to answer it will be useful. We can't discuss poetry at all without some sort of agreement about what we mean by a good poem.

B. May I suggest, as a preliminary, that we should have some more quotations? You said at the beginning that we ought to quote as much as possible. So far nobody but P. has quoted anything, and he has produced only two poems. I think we need a far wider basis for this discussion; and I suggest that each of us should now produce one poem which seems to him to be good.

M. I think that is a very good plan.

D. So do I. It will force us all to put our cards on the table.

A. Are we to choose new poems or old?

M. New, if possible. But the point is not the date but the quality. We want to get an example of what each of

us means by a good poem. Those who dislike or don't understand the newest poetry will obviously quote something older. P. can quote Shakespeare or Milton if he likes.

A. I hope he will.

M. Yes. But Shakespeare or Milton won't do by himself. We are discussing modern poetry, and P. must also quote something fairly modern: say, published since the War. That would include Hopkins, a good deal of Georgian poetry, and a good deal of War poetry.

B. You will get into difficulties if you fix a date. Do you want to rule out Edward Thomas, for instance? He was a very good poet, and in my opinion a 'modern' one; but I think most of his poems were published before 1918.

P. I see no sense in fixing on 1918. It is absurd to allow Housman's *Last Poems*, but not *The Shropshire Lad*, or de la Mare's *Motley*, but not *The Listeners* or *Peacock Pie*.

C. And what about D. H. Lawrence? Many of his best poems were written during the War or before it.

A. And the early hilarious poems of Mr. T. S. Eliot, the only ones of his that I read with pleasure? Surely you wouldn't exclude them?

D. And Pound? And T. E. Hulme? And Harold Monro?

M. Very well. Have it your own way. We won't fix any date. But I repeat: the more modern, in spirit and in date, the better. Now who will begin?

P. Obviously B. must begin, as it was his suggestion.

B. I am ready. We have prevented M. from fixing a date, and I shall take advantage of that. I shall choose a poet of aristocratic and scholarly temper who has never been popular, was born nearly a century ago, and is now as much cried down as his friend Hopkins is cried up. I choose *Nightingales* by Robert Bridges.

Reads:

Beautiful must be the mountains whence ye come,
And bright in the fruitful valleys the streams, wherefrom
Ye learn your song:
Where are those starry woods? O might I wander there,
Among the flowers which in that heavenly air
Bloom the year long!

Nay, barren are those mountains, and spent the streams:
Our song is the voice of desire, that haunts our dreams,
A throe of the heart,
Whose pining visions dim, forbidden hopes profound,
No dying cadence nor long sigh can sound,
For all our art.

Alone, aloud in the raptured ear of men
We pour our dark nocturnal secret; and then,
As night is withdrawn
From these sweet-springing meads and bursting boughs of May,
Dream, while the innumerable choir of day
Welcome the dawn.

A. A beautiful poem.

D. A technically skilful poem, with nothing much behind it. An artificial poem, like most of Bridges's.

A. The writing of poetry is an art. How should a poem be anything else than artificial?

D. That is a mere quibble.

M. Our business now is to listen, not to argue. Do you want to read anything else, B.?

B. Yes. The last poem of Edward Thomas's, *Out in the Dark.*

Reads:

Out in the dark over the snow
The fallow fawns invisible go
With the fallow doe;
And the winds blow
Fast as the stars are slow.

Stealthily the dark hunts round
And, when the lamp goes, without sound
At a swifter bound
Than the swiftest hound,
Arrives, and all else is drowned;

And star and I and wind and deer,
Are in the dark together,—near,
Yet far,—and fear
Drums on my ear
In that sage company drear.

How weak and little is the light,
All the universe of sight,
Love and delight,
Before the might,
If you love it not, of night.

D. Certainly that is a good poem.

B. You don't think *him* an artificial poet?

D. How could I? Edward Thomas and Bridges are poles apart.

M. Who will be the next? Are you ready, P.?

P. Yes. I choose first Blunden's *Forefathers.*

Reads:

Here they went with smock and crook,
  Toiled in the sun, lolled in the shade,
Here they mudded out the brook
  And here their hatchet cleared the glade:
Harvest-supper woke their wit,
Huntsman's moon their wooings lit.

From this church they led their brides,
  From this church themselves were led
Shoulder-high; on these waysides
  Sat to take their beer and bread.
Names are gone—what men they were
These their cottages declare.

Names are vanished, save the few
  In the old brown Bible scrawled;
These were men of pith and thew,
  Whom the city never called;
Scarce could read or hold a quill,
Built the barn, the forge, the mill.

On the green they watched their sons
  Playing till too dark to see,
As their fathers watched them once,
  As my father once watched me;
While the bat and beetle flew
On the warm air webbed with dew.

Unrecorded, unrenowned,
  Men from whom my ways begin,
Here I know you by your ground
  But I know you not within—

There is silence, there survives
Not a moment of your lives.

Like the bee that now is blown
  Honey-heavy on my hand,
From his toppling tansy-throne
  In the green tempestuous land—
I'm in clover now, nor know
Who made honey long ago.

D. I expected P. to choose a Georgian poem.

P. Why do D. and his friends sneer at the Georgians? They were sensible poets, writing about solid country things, not about the unbelievable oddities that might be going on in their own heads. They didn't tie their meanings into knots and expect me to enjoy untying them. They didn't preach: they weren't political or moral or psychological.

D. This is an unprovoked attack. I was not sneering, merely observing that P. had done what I expected him to do in choosing a bucolic Georgian poem.

A. Come, D., you must admit that you do despise the Georgians.

D. Was Edward Thomas a Georgian? I should not dare to despise him. But I will admit, if you like, that I think Georgian poetry generally inferior to the poetry that came after it; and I could give reasons for this opinion. But M. has said that we are not to argue. What else is P. going to read?

P. To show that I can like other kinds of poetry than the bucolic, I shall read one poem of Yeats. I have heard

that he has become a modern poet in his old age; and I know that he can be as obscure as the best of them. But this is not obscure. I don't know if it is modern.

Reads:

For Anne Gregory

'Never shall a young man,
Thrown into despair
By those great honey-coloured
Ramparts at your ear,
Love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.'

'But I can get a hair-dye
And set such colour there,
Brown, or black, or carrot,
That young men in despair
May love me for myself alone
And not my yellow hair.'

'I heard an old religious man
But yesternight declare
That he had found a text to prove
That only God, my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.'

D. Now I should like to have a completely different kind of good poem. I should like to hear A. reading one of the early Eliot poems which he says he enjoys.

A. Very well. The *Prufrock* poems do give me great pleasure. I wish he had continued in this hilariously scornful vein. He has remained scornful, but has ceased to be hilarious. I choose *The Boston Evening Transcript.*

Reads:

The readers of the *Boston Evening Transcript*
Sway in the wind like a field of ripe corn.

When evening quickens faintly in the street,
Wakening the appetites of life in some,
And to others bringing the *Boston Evening Transcript*,
I mount the steps and ring the bell, turning
Wearily, as one would turn to nod good-bye to Rochefoucauld,
If the street were time and he at the end of the street,
And I say, 'Cousin Harriet, here is the *Boston Evening Transcript*'.

Now I call that a *very* good poem.

P. Do you? Now I don't call it a poem at all.

M. Produce another poem, A., before we get into an argument.

A. I will produce a really modern poem this time, to show that I do not hate all poetry later than *Prufrock*. I had nearly chosen Auden's *Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle*, a poem which I find comprehensible and moving and admire for its technical skill. But on consideration I think it too archaistic. I choose instead *August* by Louis MacNeice, a very intelligent poet.

Reads:

The shutter of time darkening ceaselessly
Has whisked away the foam of may and elder
And I realize how now, as every year before,
Once again the gay months have eluded me.

For the mind, by nature stagey, welds its frame
Tomb-like around each little world of a day;
We jump from picture to picture and cannot follow
The living curve that is breathlessly the same.

While the lawn-mower sings moving up and down
Spirting its little fountain of vivid green,
I, like Poussin, make a still-bound fête of us
Suspending every noise, of insect or machine.

Garlands at a set angle that do not slip,
Theatrically (and as if for ever) grace
You and me and the stone god in the garden
And Time who also is shown with a stone face.

But all this is a dilettante's lie
Time's face is not stone nor still his wings,
Our mind, being dead, wishes to have time die
For we being ghosts cannot catch hold of things.

P. I am disappointed in A. He has gone over to the wrong side. First, he openly admires T. S. Eliot and reads out a poem which is not a poem at all. Next, he chooses an odd tied-up poem by one of these young men, of which I can only understand the first verse.

A. I am sorry to have disappointed you. Whom did you expect me to quote?

P. Oh, I don't know. Housman, perhaps.

M. It *is* odd that no one—no one on the Right Wing, that is—has quoted Housman. I feel inclined to make good the deficiency.

Reads:

In valleys green and still
  Where lovers wander maying
They hear from over hill
  A music playing.

Behind the drum and fife,
  Past hawthornwood and hollow,
Through earth and out of life
  The soldiers follow.

The soldier's is the trade:
  In any wind or weather
He steals the heart of maid
  And man together.

The lover and his lass
  Beneath the hawthorn lying
Have heard the soldiers pass,
  And both are sighing.

And down the distance they
  With dying note and swelling
Walk the resounding way
  To the still dwelling.

B. A most moving and beautiful poem. Even D. can have nothing to say against it?

C. I should expect him to have a great deal to say against Housman.

D. Not at all. In this poem, as in most of his poems, Housman has done exactly what he set out to do. He has got rid of his own unhappiness, his own self-pity, by transferring it, expanding it, glorifying it. He has laid it on the backs of the marching soldiers. He has done this

perfectly successfully for himself, and will do as much for any reader who has the same burden.

P. Well, but why not? You sound contemptuous.

D. No, I am not contemptuous. As I say, he has done it very well. But there are better things for a poet to do, and these are things which Housman could not do.

P. I don't understand.

A. I think he means no more than this: that Housman is a romantic poet. 'Romantic' has become, to people like D., a term not exactly of abuse, but of pity and impatience. To be romantic is to be a coward, a weakling.

M. We must not be trapped into the futile old debate between classical and romantic. These are catchwords and I refuse to be caught.

C. Well, in obedience to your own principle, you must now quote something more modern than Housman.

M. More modern in spirit, but not in date. I shall quote Hopkins, partly in order to mark my disagreement with P., who seems to think that Hopkins is now overestimated, just as Bridges is underestimated. I agree about Bridges. But between him and Hopkins there can be no comparison. Bridges was a minor poet and Hopkins a great poet; and a great poet cannot be overestimated—or indeed estimated at all. I choose an easy poem, *Pied Beauty*, because I believe that in Hopkins obscurity is accidental, not, as it is in some modern poets, essential. It is no part of his proper quality.

Reads:

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

C. No, this won't do. You can't speak of Hopkins as a great poet and then quote only one of his slighter poems. You must quote something in which all his powers are at full stretch.

Reads:

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more.* I can;
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.
But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan
With darksome devouring eyes my bruisèd bones? and fan,
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.
Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer.

Cheer whom, though? the hero whose heaven-handling
flung me, fóot tród
Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one?
That night, that year
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my
God!) my God.

M. What else do you choose, C.?

C. The Hopkins must be allowed as an extra. My other two are D. H. Lawrence: *Song of a Man who has Come Through*, and Yeats: *The Second Coming.*

Reads:

Song of a Man who has Come Through

Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!
A fine wind is blowing in the new direction of Time.
If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me!
If only I am sensitive, subtle, oh, delicate, a winged gift!
If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and am borrowed
By the fine, fine wind that takes its course through the chaos
of the world
Like a fine, an exquisite chisel, a wedge-blade inserted;
If only I am keen and hard like the sheer tip of a wedge
Driven by invisible blows,
The rock will split, we shall come at the wonder, we shall
find the Hesperides.

Oh, for the wonder that bubbles into my soul,
I would be a good fountain, a good well-head,
Would blur no whisper, spoil no expression.

What is the knocking?
What is the knocking at the door in the night?
It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.
Admit them, admit them.

And then one more Yeats, more definitely the new Yeats than *For Anne Gregory*.

Reads:

The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

M. Now, D., how will you wind up this brief anthology?

P. The Left Wing has the last word. We shall end with some richly incomprehensible poems.

D. *Gerontion*, which started us off on this anthologizing, must, I suppose, count as one of my choices, since P.,

who suggested it, certainly does not think it a Good Poem. But I want to quote two more poems as well. The first is Eberhart's *The Groundhog.*

Reads:

In June, amid the golden fields,
I saw a groundhog lying dead.
Dead lay he; my senses shook,
And mind outshot our naked frailty.
There lowly in the vigorous summer
His form began its senseless change,
And made my senses waver dim
Seeing nature ferocious in him.
Inspecting close his maggots' might
And seething cauldron of his being,
Half with loathing, half with a strange love,
I poked him with an angry stick.
The fever arose, became a flame
And Vigour circumscribed the skies,
Immense energy in the sun,
And through my frame a sunless trembling.
My stick had done nor good nor harm.
Then stood I silent in the day
Watching the object, as before;
And kept my reverence for knowledge
Trying for control, to be still,
To quell the passion of the blood;
Until I had bent down on my knees
Praying for joy in the sight of decay.
And so I left; and I returned
In Autumn strict of eye, to see
The sap gone out of the groundhog,
But the bony sodden hulk remained.
But the year had lost its meaning,

And in intellectual chains
I lost both love and loathing,
Mured up in the wall of wisdom.
Another summer took the fields again
Massive and burning, full of life,
But when I chanced upon the spot
There was only a little hair left,
And bones bleaching in the sunlight
Beautiful as architecture;
I watched them like a geometer,
And cut a walking stick from a birch.
It has been three years, now.
There is no sign of the groundhog.
I stood there in the whirling summer,
My hand capped a withered heart,
And thought of China and of Greece,
Of Alexander in his tent;
Of Montaigne in his tower,
Of Saint Theresa in her wild lament.

The last poem will provide a contrast. It is Auden's *Song for the New Year*. It is an example of a kind of new poetry that is not in the least obscure, and is based on the music-hall song. MacNeice's *Bagpipe Music* is another of the same sort. I choose this poem of Auden's because I think it good, and because I want to show that the newest poetry is not necessarily the most difficult.

Reads:

It's farewell to the drawing-room's civilized cry
The professor's sensible whereto and why
The frock-coated diplomat's social aplomb
Now matters are settled with gas and with bomb.

The works for two pianos, the brilliant stories
Of reasonable giants and remarkable fairies,
The pictures, the ointments, the frangible wares,
And the branches of olive are stored upstairs.

For the Devil has broken parole and arisen,
He has dynamited his way out of prison,
Out of the well where his Papa throws
The rebel angel, the outcast rose.

Like influenza he walks abroad,
He stands on the bridge, he waits by the ford;
As a goose or a gull he flies overhead,
He hides in the cupboards and under the bed.

Assuming such shapes as may best disguise
The hate that burns in his big blue eyes;
He may be a baby that croons in its pram,
Or a dear old grannie boarding a tram:

A plumber, a doctor, for he has the skill
To adopt a serious profession at will;
Superb at ice-hockey, a prince at the dance,
He's fierce as the tiger, secretive as plants.

O were he to triumph, dear heart, you know
To what depths of shame he would drag you low;
He would steal you away from me, yes, my dear,
He would steal you and cut off your marvellous hair.

Millions already have come to their harm,
Succumbing like doves to his adder's charm:
Hundreds of trees in the wood are unsound;
I'm the axe that must cut them down to the ground.

For I, after all, am the fortunate one,
The Happy-go-Lucky, the spoilt third son;
For me it is written the Devil to chase,
And to rid the earth of the human race.

The behaving of man is a world of horror,
A sedentary Sodom and slick Gomorrah:
I must take charge of the liquid fire
And storm the cities of human desire;

The buying and selling, the eating and drinking,
The disloyal machines and irreverent thinking,
The lovely dullards again and again
Inspiring their bitter ambitious men.

I shall come, I shall punish, the Devil be dead:
I shall have caviare thick on my bread,
I shall build myself a cathedral for home
With a vacuum cleaner in every room.

I shall ride on the front in a platinum car,
My features shall shine, my name shall be Star:
Day long and night long the bells I shall peal,
And down the long street I shall turn the cart-wheel.

So Little John, Long John, Polly and Peg,
And poor little Horace with only one leg,
You must leave your breakfast, your desk, and your play
On a fine summer morning the Devil to slay.

For it's order and trumpet and anger and drum,
And power and glory command you to come:
The graves shall fly open and suck you all in
And the earth shall be emptied of mortal sin.

The fishes are silent deep in the sea,
The skies are lit up like a Christmas tree,
The star in the West shoots its warning cry:
'Mankind is alive, but mankind must die.'

So good-bye to the house with its wallpaper red,
Good-bye to the sheets on the warm double bed,
Good-bye to the beautiful birds on the wall,
It's good-bye, dear heart, good-bye to you all.

P. Well, we have all put our cards on the table. What next? Can I return to my original question: what exactly do you mean by saying that *Gerontion* is a magnificent poem?

M. Yes, but it is merged now in a wider question. What do we all mean by a Good Poem? Is any agreement possible? When A. says that *The 'Boston Evening Transcript'* is a very good poem, and P. says that it is not a poem at all, is there any authority to which either can appeal? Can criticism judge between them? What we must now consider, I suggest, is the function of criticism, what it can and cannot do.

P. If criticism tells me that *The 'Boston Evening Transcript'* is a good poem, I shall not believe it.

M. Why not?

P. Because the decision whether a poem is good or bad is my own affair. Nobody shall make up my mind for me. I have heard this poem read aloud, I know what I mean by a good poem——

A. Do you?

P. Yes, but I refuse to attempt a definition—and I know that *The 'Boston Evening Transcript'* is not what I mean by a good poem. That is all there is to be said.

M. Excellent. The reader must (and always does) make up his mind for himself. P. has done what I meant him to do, corroborated what D. said when we were discussing *Gerontion*, that it is one thing to experience a poem and another thing to criticize it. The reader's business

is to experience the poem, to stand where the poet stood, to see what he saw. This experience will issue in choice, in the decision whether to accept the poem or to reject it. This experience issuing in choice is one activity: criticism is another, and is secondary and subordinate. After the choice has been made, criticism may find reasons for it or against it, but the reasons do not make the choice.

A. No, the reasons do not make the choice. Choice is the reader's business, reasoning the critic's. But the reader must turn critic, as D. said, and learn from criticism, in order that he may go back to the poem with a better understanding. He must not be arrogant. P. must not be allowed to say that the decision whether a poem is good or bad is his own affair. The decision whether to *accept* or *reject* the poem is his own affair. He must choose for himself. But he is very likely to choose wrong, and the question whether he *has* chosen wrong, whether the poem is good or bad, is not his own affair. Criticism must answer that question, and it is to criticism that he must turn for guidance. Then he may choose again, and perhaps choose differently.

M. Yes, the purpose of criticism is, as D. said, to make a fuller experience of the poem possible. That is what criticism can do. But I want first an agreement as to what it *cannot* do. Many people have a notion that somewhere, if we were only clever enough to find it, there is laid up a perfectly satisfactory definition of a Good Poem. If we could find it every new poem could

be judged by this perfect standard, and there would be no more disputes. But such a standard, if it could be found, would be useless. The reading of a poem is an experience issuing in choice, in acceptance or rejection. It is not, and cannot be, the testing of the poem by a rule, a standard.

B. I agree so far: the reader must choose for himself, and this activity is necessarily independent of criticism. If a perfect standard could be found we should not use it. But criticism has its own province. When the readers have turned critics and are reflecting, analysing, comparing, disputing; when they are arguing whether a poem is good or bad; then a standard *is* relevant, and is anxiously sought and desired. Does it exist?

M. Yes. Ideally, criticism can provide a standard, and make true judgements of good and bad.

P. Ideally but not actually? What does that mean? That ideally, but not actually, criticism can judge whether *The 'Boston Evening Transcript'* is a good poem?

M. Yes, that is what I do mean. I am using T. S. Eliot's theory of poetry as 'a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written', an organic whole which is altered by the arrival of the new poem. 'The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations,

proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.' The standard, then, to be applied to the new poem, is simply this: does it fit in? Ideally, criticism should be able to say: this poem fits in and this poem does not fit in, and these judgements of good and bad would be final. The good poem fits in and the bad poem does not fit in.

But this standard could only be applied by an ideal criticism, that is, a criticism which was aware of the complete structure, the living whole. Eliot's theory says, in effect: if we were aware of the whole we should be able to say of one poem that it fitted in and of another that it did not fit in, and these judgements would be final. But this universal awareness can never be attained. In its actual and imperfect state criticism can only say: this poem appears to fit in, or not to fit in. Only the ideal criticism, to which all good criticism is an approximation, could give final judgements. Every critic who knows his business is a contributor to that universal awareness, and these contributions, these partial and provisional judgements, are immediately valuable. They are elucidations, statements of what is known of the structure of the living whole. They state what has been already perceived, and make it possible for the reader to perceive new things, or rather, to perceive in a new way. They are, in Eliot's words, 'a development of sensibility'.

D. Eliot's theory of value is illuminating, but it is also dangerous. His requirement of conformity between the

old and the new does not really support a stupid traditionalism, but the traditionalists are likely to think it does, and to persuade others more stupid than themselves of the same thing. I prefer I. A. Richards's theory of value, which is purely subjective. Poetry in his view is a means of reorganizing ourselves, of bringing all our faculties, impulses, or whatever you like to call them, into harmonious activity, so that one does not frustrate another. The question, then, of the relative value of two poems is a question of the relative value of two states of mind, or forms and degrees of order in the personality.

P. Well, where have we got to? We began by asking if there was any court of appeal, any authority which could decide a dispute about the merits of a poem.

M. And in answer two criteria, two tests of value have been suggested: Eliot's, of conformity between the old and the new; and Richards's, of the degree of order or harmony in the personality.

P. Then you and D. think that both these tests of value would show *Gerontion* to be a good poem? Is that your answer to my question about what you meant by saying that it was a magnificent poem?

M. Not exactly. When I say that *Gerontion* is a magnificent poem I mean first of all simply to record a fact: that after several readings I have made my choice. I have accepted the poem. Next, criticism has to reflect on this choice, to find reasons; and here I may turn for help to Eliot's or Richards's theories of value. But neither of these tests

will give a clear and undeniable result. I can ask myself: does it fit in, does it conform? But to answer that would require a volume, in which I should compare this poem with all the poems that I know. And even then the answer could only be provisional, tentative. I could only say at the end, as I say now: it appears to me to fit in. Or I can ask myself: does it produce in my mind, or rather in my whole self, an ordered and harmonious activity? But again the answer can only be: I think it does. It will be better, perhaps, to turn to one of those critical statements which I said were immediately valuable. I turn then to Coleridge's saying that the Imagination (or the poetic faculty) shows itself in 'the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities', in, for example, 'a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order'. This is a profound saying. It points out a character which every one qualified to judge will recognize as a mark of good poetry. Is it to be found in *Gerontion*? I think it is. The question of intensity of emotion is a matter for intuition; but the question of order can be partly answered by investigation, by analysis. Here I turn to Richards again. He enumerates four kinds of meaning in a poem: Sense, or what the poet says; Feeling, his attitude to what he is talking about; Tone, his attitude to his listener; and Intention, his aim, conscious or unconscious. If you analyse a poem under these four heads you should be able to see whether it has 'more than usual order'. Well, as to Sense, D. has given you a paraphrase of that already. I don't know if he'd like to complete his work by analysing it briefly under the other three heads?

D. I don't want to, because it is enormously difficult to make a paraphrase of any kind that is not a caricature; and a paraphrase of the Feeling is much worse than a paraphrase of the Sense: it is an invitation to disaster. But as I have begun I must not shirk finishing, and I will make a rough attempt.

The Feeling of the poem has, I think, this sort of scale or range: consciousness of defeat, shame, despair; a vigorous disgust and curious pity; a determined examination of the situation that horrifies and disgusts, an exact numbering of the causes of defeat; the expectation of doom and a furious exultation in it; and at last sadness, acceptance, calm.

The Tone, in general, is of one who says to his hearer: understand this, feel this, take it in; it is horrible but it must be realized, you shall not be allowed to evade it.

The Intention is, consciously, a moral one: to exhibit the depravity and prophesy the doom of our civilization.

M. This sort of investigation is a useful exercise. If you analyse the poem in this way, and then consider it again in the light of your analysis, you should be able to see how far the emotion of the poem has fused it into a unity in which every part is alive with the life of the whole. This consideration may send you back to the poem to make your choice again, or it may confirm the choice already made. I may say that I have performed this exercise on *Gerontion* and have found my choice, my acceptance, confirmed.

A. That is, you find in it 'more than usual order'?

M. Yes.

A. What about the lines which neither you nor D. were able to explain, the lines

> I would meet you upon this honestly.
> I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
> To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.

Do you find this order in them? Are they 'alive with the life of the whole'?

M. I think D. must answer that.

D. I answer, Yes, certainly. The 'life of the whole' is not mainly in the sense. I admit that I cannot see the exact relation of these lines to the general sense of the poem. There is something wrong here—in me or in the poem. But the feeling of the poem is more important than the sense, and the feeling in these lines is clear enough.

A. What is it?

D. Acceptance, resignation; the refusal to protest against the destruction of what has been precious and is now not worth preserving.

M. Has A. subsided for the moment?

A. For the moment.

M. Then I will sum up my answer to P.'s question about *Gerontion*. He asked me what I meant by saying that it was a good poem. I reply that I mean, first of all, simply to record a fact: that after several readings I have made my choice. I have accepted the poem. This is not a tautology. I am not simply repeating that I think it good. To quote Richards again, at the moment of choice the

personality of the reader 'stands balanced between the particular experience which is the realized poem and the whole fabric of its past experiences and developed habits of mind'. Can the new experience be taken in? The first part of my answer is that I have accepted the poem in this sense. Next, to justify this choice, as far as I can, I give the results of such investigation as I have been able to perform. I assert that the poem appears to me to fit in with the living whole or structure of all the poetry that has ever been written; to proceed from an ordered and harmonious activity of the poet's whole self, and to be able to produce a like condition in the reader's; and to possess the combination of 'a more than usual emotion with more than usual order' which Coleridge observed to be a mark of good poetry.

C. Well, P., are you at all satisfied?

P. I have learnt something about what you and M. and D. mean by a good poem. And I am left saying to myself: Well, that is not what *I* mean by a good poem.

M. What do you mean by a good poem?

P. I mean a beautiful poem. And neither *Gerontion*, nor *The 'Boston Evening Transcript'*, nor *August*, nor the second Hopkins poem, nor *Song of a Man who has Come Through*, nor *The Groundhog*, nor *Song for the New Year* seem to me to be beautiful.

D. Really, I don't think P. can be allowed to bring in this notion of 'the beautiful'. It will waste time, and there is no sense in it. When he says these poems are not beautiful he means only: I don't like these poems.

P. Not at all. I mean: I don't like these poems because they don't possess the quality of beauty.

M. Yes, but tell us what you are really objecting to. What is it in these poems that you think incompatible with beauty?

P. They have no music in them; they are cold, deliberate, self-conscious; they are ugly or dreary or prosaic. *Gerontion* is ugly, dreary, and in one place indecent; *The 'Boston Evening Transcript'* is prosaic and dreary; *August* is cold, clever, tortuous; the second Hopkins poem is gloomy, strained, overwrought; *Song of a Man who has Come Through* is not a *song* at all: it is a sort of shapeless outburst of enthusiasm; *The Groundhog* is an obscure meditation on a disgusting subject; *Song for the New Year* is a jogtrot ballad celebrating destruction. None of this can be called beautiful.

M. I take these charges in turn. First, 'there is no music in them'. I must reply bluntly with a contradiction. There *is* music in these poems—even in *The 'Boston Evening Transcript'*—but it is not the music you expect, and therefore you say there is none. Do you find music in Bridges's *Nightingales*?

P. Yes. I admit that I didn't at the first reading.

M. Bridges's music is not as expected as the music of *In valleys green and still* or of *For Anne Gregory*. The music of the poems you complain of is only rather more unexpected. Listen for it and you will hear it in time.

Next you accuse these poems of being 'cold, deliberate, self-conscious'. It seems odd that at the same time you

object to Lawrence's *Song of a Man who has Come Through* for being 'a shapeless outburst of enthusiasm'.

P. I should have excepted the Lawrence poem from the charge of self-consciousness and coldness. My objection to that poem is a different one: that it is shapeless, prosaic. Enthusiasm without shape is no good, nor is shapeliness without feeling. And I repeat that *The 'Boston Evening Transcript'*, *August*, and *The Groundhog* are cold, self-conscious, deliberate.

M. Do you mean that the poets do not seem to be carried away?

P. Yes, I do.

M. That is, you miss in these poems the singing note, the ecstasy, the rapture,

> The roll, the rise, the carol, the creation,

in a word, *lyricism*? You are complaining that these poets do not seem to be singing because they must, to ease their breasts of melodies, but rather to be deliberately making statements on unpleasant subjects?

P. Yes, I do complain of that.

M. But this demand for lyricism is illegitimate. It is no good saying to the poet: that is the kind of poem I like—(chiefly because it is the kind of poem I was brought up on)—that is the kind of poem you must write. The poet writes what he can, what his own nature and the nature of the times make it necessary that he should write. And at present it is necessary that he should make statements on unpleasant subjects.

My winter world, that scarcely breathes that bliss
Now, yields you, with some sighs, our explanation.

It is a winter world for these poets, as it was for Hopkins. It scarcely breathes bliss, and has no cause for rapture, for the singing note. Faced with what is horrifying or ominous or disgusting, the poet must do what Eliot does in *Gerontion*, Hopkins in *Carrion Comfort*, Yeats in *The Second Coming*, and Eberhart in *The Groundhog*; what Shakespeare does in the tragedies; accept it, use it; make it tolerable, not by falsifying it but by accepting it, harmonizing it, by making out of it a work of art. This work of art will be a presentation of what horrifies, terrifies, or disgusts: a statement on an unpleasant subject.

D. 'In the destructive element immerse. That is the way.'

B. I observe that you have cunningly pushed P. away from his original position. His charge was that these poems were cold, deliberate, self-conscious. Granted that it is necessary for the poets at the present time to make statements instead of singing songs, and to make them about unpleasant subjects, is it necessary for them to do it coldly, deliberately, self-consciously?

M. I can only meet that with a denial. These poems are not cold, deliberate, self-conscious. Each of the three poems that P. singled out for attack is the expression of a strong emotion; each is the result of a situation in which the poet is constrained to find a formula for an intense and otherwise overwhelming emotion.

P. Do you mean to say that *The 'Boston Evening Transcript'*

is the expression of an intense and otherwise overwhelming emotion?

M. Yes, I do. The poem is humorous. But humour and wit are ways of dealing with, finding a formula for, a strong emotion. Think of Donne's and Marvell's love-poems; think of Hamlet's puns and quibbles. This poem is built on an incongruity: the world is as it is; and evening brings to Cousin Harriet the '*Boston Evening Transcript*'. That is funny, if you like; or, if you like, it is tragic; and this incongruity is fused by a strong emotion.

B. What about *August* and *The Groundhog*?

M. *August* is, as P. said, clever and tortuous. Why not?

D. It is a simple truth, denied only by the envious or the puritanical, that it is better to be clever than to be stupid.

B. Is it better to be tortuous than straightforward?

D. It may be. When the game is to go crooked it is better not to go straight.

B. The game? Then you admit that MacNeice is playing a game? *He* is not constrained by a strong emotion? He is simply amusing himself? He is being clever and tortuous for fun?

D. No. I don't admit that. But what if he were? Why should a poet not amuse himself and be clever, if he can, for fun? A funny poem, pure and simple, may be a Good Poem.

M. Yes, one answer to P.'s charge that these poems are 'cold' would be: what if they were? But as a matter of fact they are not. *August*, like *The 'Boston Evening Transcript'*

and *The Groundhog*, has behind it a considerable weight of feeling. Listen to these lines:

> But all this is a dilettante's lie
> Time's face is not stone nor still his wings,
> Our mind, being dead, wishes to have time die
> For we being ghosts cannot catch hold of things

and you will feel in them the complex of emotions which make up the poem: the fear of time, pity for the helplessness, and impatience at the futility of the human mind, consciousness of self-delusion, of frustration, of mortality.

D. Like others of MacNeice's, the poem is full of the fear of time and the fascination of time.

M. Yes. As to *The Groundhog*, the loathing, the love, the passion in the blood, are surely visible enough, audible enough, tangible enough. P. said that the poem was an obscure meditation on a disgusting subject. The subject is death and decay, a disgusting subject, certainly, but it has never been considered unpoetic. As to the obscurity, that is, I should say, of the temporary kind. It will yield, I think, even to a second reading.

B. There are still two of P.'s objections that you have not answered. He said that *Song of a Man who has Come Through* was shapeless and prosaic, and that *Carrion Comfort* was gloomy, strained, overwrought.

M. I am not sure what P. means by 'shapeless and prosaic'. Is it a complaint against the unrhymed, irregular verse?

P. Partly that, and partly that the whole thing seems to be merely an outpouring, uncontrolled, disordered.

M. It is an outpouring, but it is not uncontrolled, it is not shapeless. It is carefully built up in a sort of spiral of which the turns are the repeated words. This spiral is a shape, and a *poetic* shape; it is the shape that this poem requires. The poem is the outpouring of a man who feels himself to have been blessed, to have had an experience which must be shared because it is of importance for every one. The poet feels and speaks like a convert. He has 'come through', and for him—and for every one who can share his experience—the world is being transformed, the wonder, the new world, is being disclosed. A power is abroad which will make a new world, and he must be an instrument of that new creation. He says to his hearer: this is what I have experienced; this is what I know that I must do; this is what we must all do; we must not be afraid; we must welcome the new world, the wonder, the strangers, the angels. It is an outpouring, because an outpouring was necessary. But it is not shapeless or uncontrolled.

As to *Carrion Comfort*, P. says it is gloomy, strained, overwrought. 'Gloomy'? The poem is a refusal to despair. 'Strained'? The poet is wrestling with God. 'Overwrought'? Hopkins always loads each word to the utmost; and until one is accustomed to him this loading seems an overloading. But if you *listen* to the poem, let it speak to you in its own way, not in the way that you expect, each word will be found equal to the weight it has to carry.

P. But you have not answered my real objection to the

poem. I put it badly, but I meant something like this. The whole situation, the 'wrestling with God' seems to me, if not unreal, at least too remote from ordinary experience. The ordinary reader is inclined to say: but what is all this excitement about? That is what I meant by calling it overstrained, overwrought.

M. That opens up the whole question of religious poetry, and we cannot explore that now. But as far as Hopkins is concerned, I think the facts are against you. His poetry is all religious poetry, and yet it is widely read, welcomed, *taken in*, at a time when most readers of poetry have no religion, or nothing that Hopkins would have called religion. How is this? The answer appears to be that his experience can be shared by those who do not share his beliefs. It is not a private experience, or even limited to those of his faith. It is available to any one who knows what it is to struggle, to wrestle in the darkness. Would you agree with that, C.?

C. Yes, certainly.

P. Well, I will reconsider Hopkins, and some other matters too. Meanwhile, I think my bewilderment and my complaints have held the field long enough, and it is time for that much-postponed duel between A. and D.

M. Let us first sum up the amount of agreement we have reached. I think we are agreed that it is one thing to experience a poem, to choose whether to accept or reject it, and another thing to criticize it; from which it follows that a perfect standard or criterion of good poetry, if it could be found, would be useless to the reader. The

reader must, and does, choose for himself, in independence of criticism. Next, that if *criticism* requires a standard, it can find only an ideal one, not a practical one. Two ideal standards have been mentioned: Eliot's, of conformity between the old and the new; and Richards's, of the form and degree of order in the personality. Are we agreed so far?

All. Yes.

M. Then I propose an adjournment, to be followed by A.'s attack upon modern poetry.

III

M. Well, A., are you ready?

A. To attack the new poets?

M. Yes. Your original assertion (as reported by C.) was that the new poets had imposed themselves, by accident mixed with cleverness, on a small and gullible public. Do you hold to that?

A. Yes, I hold to that, and I will attack the new poets with all my heart. First, I wish to consider this fact of a small and gullible public. For a long time the English public that reads poetry has been small; but it has only lately become gullible. Since the death of Tennyson no English poet has had a wide popularity, has been read and admired by the man in the street; and the poets have been moving farther and farther from the ordinary reader. At the end of the War the gulf was much widened by the theory and practice of Mr. T. S. Eliot. In 1920 he published *Gerontion*, and in 1922 *The Waste Land*, and in between, in 1921, he made the assertion that 'it appears likely that poetry, in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*'. Now this theory could have been asserted at many times by many people without effect. But asserted at that particular time by the most powerful of living poets and critics, it had a prodigious effect. Prodigious and deplorable. It worked in two ways: the poets no longer tried to be comprehensible, and the readers no longer expected to understand. Thus, the public for poetry became gullible. The reader now

approaches a new poem in a spirit of extraordinary meekness. He is prepared for anything, he will swallow anything, he will not complain, he will not ask questions. He is content to suppose that *the queerer it sounds, the better it is.*

D. Really, A., this is going too far. Has anybody ever supposed that? Take P. here as the ordinary reader. Is he meek? Does he ask no questions? Will he swallow anything?

A. P. is an honourable exception. But the situation is as I have described it. The poets maunder and the public has been bamboozled into accepting their maunderings. I will give you some examples.

D. Not from *The Waste Land*, I hope?

A. No, unfortunately that is not a maundering poem. If it were, it would have had less influence. There are at present three kinds of obscurity in poetry, and all of them depend on the meekness induced in the reader by the belief that poetry must be *difficult*. The first two kinds are examples of what I call maundering; the third is much the most respectable, and of this kind *The Waste Land* is the prototype. This kind also bamboozles the reader, but it does it in a highly respectable, sometimes a very intelligent, way. My first two kinds are the Incomprehensibles. The first is incomprehensible simply from the poet's laziness, and the reader's meekness. A beautiful example may be found in a well-known anthology of modern verse. The poem is called *Daedalus* and begins:

> Like the enormous liner of his limbs
> and fell.

You see? The reader will swallow anything, so why not make him swallow a sentence which is not a sentence, a comparison which compares nothing?

My next kind is not lazily senseless but deliberately senseless. It is based on a theory called Surrealism. I dislike this sort of poem too much to quote one, and shall only refer to *In Defence of Humanism*, by David Gascoyne. It is a fine example. But it is not, I think, worth wasting time or argument on Surrealism, a theory which has very little life in it, and is bound to excite the foolish for a few years and then expire.

Next we come to the most respectable and extensive kind of obscurity. Poems of this kind are not incomprehensible, but they are not comprehended by the ordinary reader. *The Waste Land* is the most famous example. It is built upon allusions to the books mentioned in the notes, and nobody who hasn't read all the books can understand it, that is, hardly anybody at all. *Gerontion* is a poem of this kind: it needs a commentary, an explanation. *Sir, no man's enemy* is a poem of this kind; it demands a knowledge of psychology which the ordinary reader cannot be expected to have. Many new poems demand some kind of special knowledge, most frequently of psychology, sometimes of science, sometimes even of theosophy or astrology. But you may have the special knowledge and still find the poem obscure; or the poem may be obscure in ways which no special knowledge can illuminate. At the root of this third kind of obscurity in its various forms there is always one thing: the poet's refusal to explain himself to

the ordinary reader. Eliot says somewhere that the relation between the poet and the reader is like the relation between a burglar and a house-dog. The poet throws the reader a meaning to keep him quiet while the poem does its work. But some poets, he goes on to say, omit this civil precaution (my phrase, not his) and don't bother to provide a meaning for the ordinary reader. They address themselves to the readers who won't want it; and by leaving out this meaning the poem becomes more concentrated, more intense. Eliot himself, of course, writes in this way. His later poems are not even provided with notes. The reader is left to make what he can of *Ash Wednesday* and the rest. The same refusal to explain is to be found in Yeats's *Byzantium* and in the work of some of the best of the new poets. I am thinking particularly of Dylan Thomas, Richard Eberhart (*The Groundhog* is one of the easiest of his poems, and yet P. found it obscure), K. J. Raine, and Charles Madge.

Holy is lucidity

one of the new poets observes

And the mind that dare explain.

But most of his colleagues do not agree. They refuse to explain, and this is an attitude which I think highly objectionable: arrogant, immature, uncivilized. It is the attitude of the sulky boy who says to his elders: I can't talk to you, you won't understand. Now the boy really can't explain. Nor, perhaps, can a weak poet. But Eliot is a poet of great power, and none of those I have mentioned is a weak poet. Such poets should be able to

explain themselves to the ordinary reader and yet write poems of great intensity. If they won't they are refusing, from arrogance or melancholy or sloth, to act in a civilized manner.

This attitude of the poets is deplorable and unprecedented; and so is the attitude of their readers. These poets are admired but not understood. That a new poet should be thought obscure is not surprising; but that admiration should be added to incomprehension is unprecedented. Hitherto, when the reader did not understand he blamed the poet: a natural reaction which had its disadvantages. But his present attitude is far worse; he admires, or affects to admire, what he does not understand.

D. You are not by any chance doing the same thing yourself? You said just now that 'some of the best of the new poets' were objectionably obscure. You don't understand them, yet you think them good? You admire them, in fact?

A. You have caught me out. I should have spoken more precisely. It is true that an obscure poem may be good, and the reader may rightly admire what is good in it. But I am insisting that he ought not to put up with its obscurity. He ought not to be meek. He ought to expect to understand, and if he cannot (assuming, of course, that he is a competent reader, and has read the poem slowly and with care) he ought to object. He ought not to accept whatever he is given. What is fatal in the reader's present attitude is that he no longer expects to

understand, and therefore the way is open to every kind of poetic fraud and imposition. When I say that this poetry is not understood, I mean that in the most ordinary sense, not in the sense in which you may say that no one 'understands' *King Lear* or the *Divina Commedia*. I mean that the plain prose sense of these poems is not understood, or that they have no prose sense.

D. Must every poem have a prose sense?

A. I thought you would ask that. I say, Yes. I wish to assert, as firmly as possible, that every poem should have a prose sense.

D. This is really astonishing. Do you call *Kubla Khan* a good poem? Or do you think it has a prose sense? And what about nonsense poems, and nonsense refrains to what you would call sensible poems, the nonsense refrains of the ballads?

A. Nonsense poems I should have excluded. I will amend my assertion and say that every serious poem should have a prose sense. And I readily admit that there are some modern poems which have foolishly been accused of being obscure when they were really only nonsensical: nonsense poems and joke poems by Edith Sitwell and Cummings and Laura Riding. But these are exceptional in modern poetry or in any poetry. Most poetry is serious and is meant to be taken seriously. As to the nonsense refrains in the ballads, they do not affect my point. The ballads have a clear prose sense, not in the least obscured by the refrains. Who would want to read the refrains without the ballads? But that is what the

modern poets require us to do. As to *Kubla Khan*, that is a very interesting example, and I am glad it has been brought up. I think it *has* a prose sense; and on this point I have the support of Mr. Michael Roberts. No one will accuse him of being on my side, for he is a new poet himself. He observes of *Kubla Khan* that 'it owes its force to its image-order, but it owes its popularity to the fact that it possesses a loose narrative order which saves the reader from the awkward fear of being taken in by nonsense'. That is a phrase which gives me great pleasure: the awkward fear of being taken in. It is this awkward fear that I wish to encourage. In reading *Kubla Khan* there is no need of it, for the poem has what Mr. Roberts calls a loose narrative order and I call a prose sense; but in reading the new poets it is much to be desired.

D. Well, if you like I will grant you that *Kubla Khan* has a prose sense. Certainly it would be easier to make a paraphrase of the sense of *Kubla Khan* than of *The Waste Land*. But consider the situation a little farther. *The Waste Land* is, you will agree, an allusive, highbrow, unintelligible poem. It is founded on allusions and quotations that only the learned or diligent can recognize or track down. Why, then, has it been so successful? Why has it had so much influence? Why is it not read only by the learned and diligent? Why is it, in the ordinary bookseller's sense, a popular poem? It is true that it has no prose sense; it is true that the ordinary reader cannot understand it; but it is also true that he reads and admires it, genuinely, without hypocrisy.

P. If 'the ordinary reader' means me, as it did just now, I may state, genuinely and without hypocrisy, that I do *not* admire *The Waste Land.* I have tried to read it.

M. All the same, I think D. is right, and a great many ordinary readers do admire it.

D. How do you explain it, A.?

A. It is partly snobbery and curiosity. The poem has got a name, it has been talked about, and people want to read it to find out what the fuss is about and to be able to talk about it themselves.

D. But this process had a beginning. Why did it get talked about, get a name?

A. Because, as I said, Eliot is a poet of great power.

D. Then a poet of great power can make his effect without taking the 'civil precaution' of providing the reader with a prose sense?

A. Yes, a poet like Eliot can make himself felt through thick mufflings of obscurity. But the question is: would it not be far better if he threw them off? Is it *necessary* for him to be so obscure? Would not *The Waste Land* be a better poem if it had a prose meaning?

D. Would not *The Waste Land* be a better poem if it were not *The Waste Land*? You have admitted that the poem makes its effect, not only on you and me but on a large number of readers. What more can you ask of any poem? What need is there for a prose meaning if the poem can make its effect, can even be, as poems go, *popular*, without it? As I said before, the Feeling in a

poem is more important than the Sense. The Sense of this poem is obscure; but the Feeling is instantly impressive and widely available: it can make its mark on a great number of readers. Hence the poem's popularity.

So that my answer to your demand for a prose meaning in this poem is first that on your own admission it is unnecessary, since the poem makes its effect without it; and next that as its presence is unnecessary so its absence is necessary. I have no doubt that *The Waste Land* is *necessarily* obscure, that if the poet had not written in this way he could not have written at all. The poets write as they can, as they must. No poet wishes to be obscure, to limit his audience, but he must write for those who can understand. He cannot stop and ask himself: will that be understood by the man in the street? If, like Shakespeare, he can write on two levels, one for the outsider, the mob, and one for those who are or can be his intimates, so much the better. But this may not be possible. It may only be possible to do what Eliot has done here (and what Yeats has done in *Byzantium*), to make the Feeling of the poem easily apprehensible and leave the Sense to those who will take the trouble to follow out his clues. This is another way of getting a wide audience without doing what is impossible: *explaining himself*, forcing on the poem a prose meaning which it cannot carry.

I submit that I have refuted your assertion that every serious poem should have a prose sense.

A. I admit a slight defeat, and I will agree that there are

poems, such as *The Waste Land*, which are necessarily obscure. But my general argument is unaffected. These poems are an exception, and I maintain that it is still generally true that a poem should have a prose sense. Granted that it was necessary for Mr. Eliot to write like that in 1922, that is no reason why the poets of 1939 should do the same. It is not necessary for them to be obscure; it is not impossible for them to explain themselves. They can and should lessen the gap between the poet and the reader. They should return to the great tradition of direct and lucid speech. Let them remember Homer, Chaucer, Dryden, Pope, Landor, Tennyson, Bridges.

D. There are some odd omissions in that list. Why should they not remember Dante (whose images are sometimes, as has already been pointed out, as hard to understand as Eliot's), or Shakespeare (a most contorted and difficult poet), or Donne or Blake or Browning or Hopkins? As for Dryden, and Pope, Eliot himself once wrote a book called *Homage to John Dryden*, and it is common knowledge that in the last twenty years the eighteenth-century poets have come into fashion and the nineteenth-century ones have gone out. The tide is now on the turn again, and soon, perhaps, we shall have the newest critics writing 'Homage to Alfred, Lord Tennyson'.

M. It is no good pelting each other with the names of poets. The discussion must be kept in hand. Let us recapitulate. So far A. has deplored the present situation, in which, he says, the poets no longer try to be comprehensible,

and the readers no longer expect to understand. He has maintained that every serious poem should have a prose sense. D. then forced him to recede a little from this position and admit that some poems are necessarily obscure and can make their effect without a prose sense. But he still affirms that a prose sense is generally necessary in poetry; and demands a return to direct and lucid speech. A. must now complete his attack on the new poets, and then we must hear D. in their defence. Have you any more accusations, A.?

A. Yes. But first I want to support my objection to obscurity with a quotation from Wordsworth. He says exactly what I want to say. 'Poets do not write for Poets alone but for men. Unless therefore we are advocates for that admiration which subsists upon ignorance, and that pleasure which arises from hearing what we do not understand, the Poet must descend from this supposed height; and, in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves.' At present the poets do write for other poets alone, or at least for the small audience which can understand without an explanation; the larger audience which some of the new poets have got is an audience without *rational* sympathy; their admiration subsists upon ignorance; they are pleased, or they affect to be pleased, but they do not understand.

The rest of my complaints can all, I think, be illustrated from Auden's *Song for the New Year*, with which D. wound up our joint anthology. Consider what seems to have happened in the making of this poem. Its root

is in despair and indignation, mixed with exhilaration, merriment, even, at the thought of destruction, of a clean sweep, an absolute end. This is the Feeling of the poem, and it is intelligible. But the Sense is, though not unintelligible, full of inconsistencies. How is this destruction to come about? Who is to be the Destroyer? At the beginning of the poem it looks as if it was to be the Devil, working 'with gas and with bomb':

> For the Devil has broken parole and arisen,
> He has dynamited his way out of prison,
> Out of the well where his Papa throws
> The rebel angel, the outcast rose.

But it soon becomes clear that the Devil cannot be the Destroyer, since it is the Devil who is to be destroyed. The Devil is in mankind. Is mankind, then, to be purged or wholly destroyed? Is the Devil in all of them? Or is there a sound remnant to be saved? It looks at first as if there was:

> Millions already have come to their harm,
> Succumbing like doves to his adder's charm:
> Hundreds of trees in the wood are unsound;
> I'm the axe that must cut them down to the ground.

But in the next verse we reach at last what appears to be the poet's real meaning. Mankind *as a whole* is devilish, and to chase the Devil is 'to rid the earth of the human race'. Who, then, is to be the Destroyer? Who will chase the Devil and make an end of mankind? To a poet living in an age of faith the answer would be obvious: God the Avenger. But neither Auden nor his readers can accept this answer. Who then? Who but the poet himself?

He now finds exhilaration, release, in the fantasy of himself as the Destroyer. But observe how this weakens the poem and takes from it its seriousness, its intensity. The destruction of the human race by God or the Devil or Fate or any supernatural power is a tragic theme, capable of purging us through pity and terror. But if the destroyer is merely Mr. Auden in masquerade, we have moved out of tragedy into burlesque. Nor would this matter if burlesque were the poet's aim. But he is double-minded, and hovers between the two.

For it's order and trumpet and anger and drum,
And power and glory command you to come:
The graves shall fly open and suck you all in
And the earth shall be emptied of mortal sin.

That has the tragic intensity. But

I shall come, I shall punish, the Devil be dead:
I shall have caviare thick on my bread,
I shall build myself a cathedral for home
With a vacuum cleaner in every room

—that is merely Mr. Auden in masquerade. The two will not mix, and that is the major inconsistency of the poem. But besides inconsistency there is irrelevance: lines and verses which are relevant neither to the burlesque nor to the tragic aspects of the poem:

O were he to triumph, dear heart, you know
To what depths of shame he would drag you low;
He would steal you away from me, yes, my dear,
He would steal you and cut off your marvellous hair.

Who is 'dear heart'? What is she for? Is she wanted? Have we got suddenly into a different kind of burlesque,

a burlesque romantic ballad? What has this to do with the end of the human race? These are questions we must not ask, for in this music-hall kind of poem, just as much as in the poem which is obscure in the highbrow manner, the poet depends on the reader's acquiescence. The reader of the new highbrow poem does not ask questions because he has acquired a conviction that poetry must be *difficult*; the reader of the new music-hall kind of poem does not ask questions because he has acquired the inattentiveness of the music-hall audience. He is swung along by the ballad rhythm, and demands only that each verse shall 'get across', shall be vivid and make its hit. He will not demand consistency or that each part of the poem shall serve the purpose of the whole.

This poem has a prose sense, but it is a sense that can only stand if the reader does not ask the obvious questions; of which the most obvious is 'You, who are you?' as the Caterpillar inquired of Alice. Who is the fortunate one, and why should he be fortunate? Is he not a man like the rest? Is not the Devil in him also? How can he be the Destroyer? There is, I believe, no satisfactory answer to these questions, and the poet only gets away with it' because the bamboozled reader does not ask them.

I repeat: the readers of poetry have become gullible, and the poets take advantage of them. That is the sum of my attack.

M. Now, D., let us have your defence.

D. My general defence of the new poets is not an answer to

A. I want to move away to fresh ground and consider something which does not arise out of anything he has said. But before I begin on this I must just comment on one or two points in his attack. He said at the beginning that Eliot had widened the gulf between the poet and the reader both by his theory, his assertion that poetry in our present civilization must be *difficult*, and by his practice, in writing such poems as *Gerontion* and *The Waste Land*. I think that modern poetry would have been no less difficult if Eliot had never existed or had been dumb. Its difficulty is due, not to Eliot's influence (great and salutary as that has been), but to the nature of the times and other causes beyond any man's control.

I must say something also about Surrealism, which he dismissed in one contemptuous sentence. I have, myself, no great liking for Surrealism, but it cannot be dismissed without a hearing. A. seemed to have no idea what a poet like David Gascoyne was trying to do. What he is doing is to construct an imitation of a dream. He takes a series of images such as occurs in a dream, gives them the extreme vividness of dream-images, and to their movement, their following on, the inevitability, the compulsion of a dream.

A. It is a day-dream, then?

D. Yes, if you like.

A. A form of self-indulgence for the poet and the reader, an escape?

D. Yes, an escape or a self-indulgence just as nonsense poetry is an escape or a self-indulgence; and as justifiable. There

are two very good nonsense lines in the poem of Gascoyne's which you mentioned:

A flock of banners fight their way through the telescoped forest
And fly away like birds towards the sound of roasting meat.

Neither nonsense poetry nor Surrealist poetry can ever be of the first importance. But they have their uses.

A. Nonsense poetry, certainly, because we enjoy it, and what more justification can be needed? But Surrealist poetry—in spite of the two lines you have quoted—is not nearly nonsensical enough. There is no fun in it, it is dreary, and it takes itself seriously. Therefore I say it has no life in it, and will not last.

D. Well, I am not concerned to prophesy its survival.

I pass on now to the general question of obscurity, and here I must observe that A.'s complaints are really a little out of date. It is no longer true to say that the new poetry is admired but not understood, or it is true only of a minority of the new poems. Most of the latest poems of the best known of the new poets, Auden, Day Lewis, Spender, MacNeice, are not obscure. Generally, I should say that the new poetry is becoming much less obscure, and usually gives the reader that prose sense which you value so much. Would you agree to that, M.?

M. I should agree that the poets you mention are now usually comprehensible. But there are others who remain very obscure: such as Charles Madge, K. J. Raine, Dylan Thomas, George Barker.

C. I think you are wrong about George Barker, who has lately turned his back upon his 'absurd and abysmal' poetic past and is becoming intelligible.

D. His poetry exactly illustrates my point; it is an excellent example of the movement away from obscurity.

B. Many of the new poets are Communists, and I see in Communism an excellent defence against obscurity. Communists must be propagandists, and a good propagandist poem must be intelligible to the ordinary reader.

D. The Communist poet will gain much more from Communism than a defence against obscurity. He gains a faith, a reasonable hope for the future of mankind, and a feeling of fellowship with others of the same faith.

A. 'Faith, hope and charity.' I have not noticed much *hope* in the new poetry I have read. On the contrary, I have been impressed with its despair, its recurring emphasis on disaster and doom.

D. The hope is in Communism; the despair is of Capitalism.

M. We have wandered from Obscurity to Communism, and from Communism to Despair. Let us go back to D.'s original point, which was simply that the new poets were becoming less obscure.

D. The nature of the times now allows a less difficult poetry. It appears to be no longer true that poetry must be difficult.

A. Do you welcome the change?

D. I don't know. It has not yet produced any poetry of the intensity of *The Waste Land* or *Byzantium.* It remains to

be seen whether it is now possible to do what A. demands: pacify the reader with a prose sense, and at the same time produce work of great intensity.

M. Is there anything else in A.'s attack that you want to answer?

D. Yes, I must say something about *Song for the New Year.* This poem holds together two moods which might seem incompatible: the mood of farce (or burlesque, as A. calls it) and the mood of desperation, anger mixed with despair. But the two are not incompatible, in literature or in life, and their fusion is a matter of common experience. Anger or indignation is a kind of exhilaration and is near to merriment; and there is such a thing as angry or tragic merriment, an angry or tragic farce. That is the mood of this poem, and I maintain that what A. calls the major inconsistency of the poem is not an inconsistency at all. Some irrelevance I admit. 'Dear heart' with her 'marvellous hair' *is*, I think, irrelevant, and the poem would be better without her. But the other questions which A. says we must not ask: Who is 'I', and why is he the Destroyer?—these are questions that do not arise. It is not that the reader is too much bamboozled to ask them; it is that they are irrelevant. Every poem creates its own world and the myths proper to that world. 'I' is not Auden in masquerade, but a mythical figure necessary to the poem's purpose. He is the Destroyer. To ask how he can be the Destroyer is no more sensible than to ask reasonable questions about the events in a farce or a fairy tale.

A. I am not convinced.

D. I hardly thought you would be. But I shall pass on now to fresh ground.

My original assertion was, I think, that poetry is healthier now than it has been for the last hundred years. I had better have gone farther back and said 'for the last two hundred and fifty years'. My general defence of the new poetry is that it has recovered a virtue, a vigour, which English poetry lost before the end of the seventeenth century. This is the virtue called by Eliot 'unification of sensibility' and illuminated in his essays on the metaphysical poets and on Marvell. This recovered health, recovered power, is, in my view, the most important fact about the new poetry; and beside it all A.'s accusations, even if they could be substantiated, would be unimportant.

P. But what do you (or Mr. Eliot) mean by 'unification of sensibility'?

A. I hope a clear distinction will be maintained between your theories and Mr. Eliot's. I presume he is not to be held responsible for this notion that poetry has newly recovered its health?

D. Certainly not. The two essays I have mentioned are hardly concerned with modern poetry at all (although the assertion which A. so much objects to, that poetry in our present civilization must be *difficult*, occurs in one of them) and in any case were written before most of the poetry I am defending came into existence. Eliot's essays are concerned with unification of sensibility as it appears

in the seventeenth-century poets. I am concerned to illustrate it, if I can, from the new poets.

But I must begin with some quotations from these essays. After contrasting some passages from Donne and Lord Herbert of Cherbury with some passages from Browning and Tennyson, he observes: 'The difference is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning: it is the difference between the intellectual and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility.'

Here I must break off to note a curious echo of this in an essay by D. H. Lawrence. 'Real thought', he says, 'is an experience. It begins as a change in the blood.' I don't suppose Lawrence had read Eliot's essay, but he was (as Eliot is) one of the poets who have recovered what had been lost for so long, the power of 'sensuous thought'.

Eliot continues: 'When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience'; and he then suggests the following theory:

'The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their

predecessors were; . . . In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered' (this was written in 1921); 'and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden.'

This dissociation continued through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although in the later Keats and the later Shelley 'there are traces of a struggle toward unification of sensibility. But Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated.'

The essay on Marvell is an attempt to isolate the quality of 'wit' in the seventeenth-century sense. I wish to single out a few of the indications he gives of its nature: 'a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace'; 'an alliance of levity and seriousness (by which the seriousness is intensified)'; it satisfies Coleridge's elucidation of Imagination as 'the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities'; 'it implies a constant inspection and criticism of experience. It involves, probably, a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible.'

So much for the seventeenth-century poets. They had the power of poetically being and doing many things at once. It is this power that is indicated in the phrases 'sensuous thought', 'unification of sensibility', 'amalgamating disparate experience', and Coleridge's 'balance or reconciliation of discordant qualities'. The poet who has this power can make use of any kind of experience;

in any one kind of experience he will show himself aware of the possibility of its opposite; thus his sentiment is always aware of the possibility of satire; his lyric enthusiasm, of reason; his seriousness, of mockery; his admiration, of disgust. He can feel his thought; and he can feel and think many discordant things at once; and he can fuse all these and make them into a whole.

This is the power that was absent from English poetry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and my argument is that the new poets have now recovered it.

M. I don't feel inclined to accept this sweeping condemnation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. You must give us some evidence.

D. It is not a condemnation. I am not condemning these poets, I am only saying that they lacked something which the early seventeenth-century poets had and the new poets have recovered.

A. You do not condemn them, but you say that they lacked health?

D. Well, I had better confine myself to saying that they suffered from dissociation of sensibility. Because of this disability there were things that they could not do. What they could do some of them did magnificently well; but a poet should be *capable de tout*; and my argument is that this capacity has now been recovered. I need not emphasize the difference between capacity and achievement.

As for the evidence that M. asks for, I can only suggest a small experiment. I have performed it myself and it satisfied me, but I don't know whether it will satisfy you.

Take some good anthologies of eighteenth-century, nineteenth-century, Georgian, and modern poetry, and compare them from this point of view. Consider what each poet is doing, how many things he is doing at once, how many balls he has in the air at the same time. I found that the various kinds of eighteenth-century poetry remain distinct and separate: the moralizing, the pastoral-descriptive, the satirical, the elegant love-poem, the religious poem, the humorous poem. In general, there is no mixing of moods, no holding together of opposites. In the nineteenth-century poets (with the partial exception of Keats and Shelley) there is still dissociation. In general, these poets think and feel separately: they can argue and reflect, and they can be lyrical, but they cannot do both at once. When you come to the new century and the Georgians there is still no change in this respect. The poets still do one thing at a time: they are wistful, fanciful, despairing, indignant, and in all these moods they are single-hearted, aware only of one kind of experience at a time. But when you come to the modern poets, that is to the poetry that begins with Eliot, there is a difference. These poets are always trying to amalgamate disparate experience. This is the change that I want to illustrate.

The first poem in our joint anthology was Bridges's *Nightingales.* I propose to set beside it Eliot's *Sweeney among the Nightingales.*

Reads: ὤμοι, πέπληγμαι καιρίαν πληγὴν ἔσω

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,

The zebra stripes along his jaw
Swelling to maculate giraffe.

The circles of the stormy moon
Slide westward toward the River Plate,
Death and the Raven drift above
And Sweeney guards the hornèd gate.

Gloomy Orion and the Dog
Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas;
The person in the Spanish cape
Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees

Slips and pulls the table cloth
Overturns a coffee-cup,
Reorganised upon the floors
She yawns and draws a stocking up;

The silent man in mocha brown
Sprawls at the window-sill and gapes;
The waiter brings in oranges
Bananas figs and hothouse grapes;

The silent vertebrate in brown
Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;
Rachel *née* Rabinovitch
Tears at the grapes with murderous paws;

She and the lady in the cape
Are suspect, thought to be in league;
Therefore the man with heavy eyes
Declines the gambit, shows fatigue,

Leaves the room and reappears
Outside the window, leaning in,
Branches of wistaria
Circumscribe a golden grin;

The host with someone indistinct
Converses at the door apart,
The nightingales are singing near
The Convent of the Sacred Heart,

And sang within the bloody wood
When Agamemnon cried aloud,
And let their liquid siftings fall
To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud.

P. What a horrible poem!

B. I much prefer Bridges.

D. You prefer a slight poem to a powerful poem; a narrow and empty poem to a poem which reconciles and fuses what would otherwise be discordant. In Eliot's poem there are two worlds, two contexts, two kinds of experience: the person in the Spanish cape, the vertebrate in brown, Rachel *née* Rabinovitch, the golden grin between the branches of wistaria—all this on the one hand; and the nightingales near the Convent of the Sacred Heart, and the story of Agamemnon, on the other; and these two kinds of experience are amalgamated.

To see the difference between Bridges and Eliot you have only to imagine Bridges's poetic self in the circumstances in which Eliot has placed *his* poetic self. Imagine him in the company of the vertebrate in brown, Rachel *née* Rabinovitch, the man with the golden grin, and the rest, hearing the nightingales near the Convent of the Sacred Heart and thinking of Agamemnon. What could Bridges do with these disparate experiences? Not hold them together, combine them, make them into a new

whole, as Eliot has done, but separate them. Bridges—or, for that matter, Tennyson or Browning or Wordsworth or Gray or Dryden or Milton—would have been forced to choose some of these experiences and ignore the others: to write a poem of one kind about the nightingales or a poem of an opposite kind about Apeneck Sweeney's companions. But Eliot has done both.

P. But that is just what I object to. The thing you praise him for is the very thing that I dislike, his doing two things at once, his putting Apeneck Sweeney and the nightingales into one poem. I daresay it is clever of him, 'powerful', if you like; it may be a *tour de force*. But I dislike it, I disapprove of it. I have an obstinate conviction that Sweeney and the rest have no business in a poem about nightingales.

D. You think perhaps that there is a poetic world and an unpoetic world?

P. I do, certainly.

D. The poetic world contains subjects suitable for poetry; and among these nightingales are of course included, and the story of Agamemnon (which, however, would seem to you highly unpoetic if it were a modern story). The unpoetic world contains, I suppose, almost the whole of ordinary experience. Such a theory will not stand a moment's examination, and it has never been and never could be accepted by any poet worth the name. It would choke the life out of poetry. Yet this theory persists and is still sleepily believed by a large number of English readers.

A. But this is not fair to P. He did not say that Apeneck Sweeney and the rest ought not to be in a poem at all. He said that they ought not to be in a poem about nightingales. What we object to is not that Eliot writes a poem about Apeneck Sweeney, but that he puts him among the nightingales.

D. Eliot did not put him there; he found him there. What is beautiful is one thing, and what is disgusting is another. We like to separate them in thought. But in life they are not separate, they are often juxtaposed. You may not like this juxtaposition, but it happens whether you like it or not. In 'real life', as we call it, Apeneck Sweeney's companions exist and we cannot avoid them; and the nightingales exist also and Sweeney hears them singing. The justification of such a poem as *Sweeney among the Nightingales* is that it turns these disparate experiences into a unity. When opposite or discordant experiences come together in real life we are dismayed. If a poem can fuse them, make them into a new whole, we have gained something of great value. The poem has won a victory and has made a victory possible for us.

This amalgamation of disparate experience has different forms and degrees. In the form of which *Sweeney among the Nightingales*, *The Waste Land*, Pound's *Ode pour l'Élection de son Sépulcre*, and Eberhart's *The Groundhog* are examples, the poet is agonizingly aware of discordant and simultaneous experiences. To save himself, to preserve his integrity, he reconciles these opposites and makes a new synthesis. In *The Groundhog* the op-

posites are death and decay, on the one hand, and 'vigorous summer', on the other. In other kinds of poem the amalgamation is an intellectual synthesis rather than a fusion performed by the emotions under the pressure of strong necessity. MacNeice's *Eclogue for Christmas* and Auden's *Epilogue* are examples of this kind of amalgamation.

In other poems again the amalgamation is not of different kinds of experience but of different ways of experiencing. This is what Eliot calls sensuous thought. The poet feels his thought, the idea and the image are one. This sensuous thinking is a notable character of modern poetry. I give a few examples chosen at random: Hulme's

> The old star-eaten blanket of the sky

Auden's

> Soon through the dykes of our content
> The crumpling flood will force a rent,

and

> The green thumb to the ledger knuckled down,
> And Courage to his leaking ship appointed,

and

> Present then the world to the world with its mendicant shadow:

Eberhart's

> Caught upon a thousand thorns, I sing

and MacNeice's

> But those who lack the peasant's conspirators,
> The tawny mountain, the unregarded buttress,

Will feel the need of a fortress against ideas and against the
Shuddering insidious shock of the theory-vendors,
The little sardine men crammed in a monster toy
Who tilt their aggregate beast against our crumbling Troy

and

It's no go my honey love, it's no go my poppet;
Work your hands from day to day, the winds will blow the
profit.
The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall for ever,
But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the weather.

The new poets are then capable of sensuous thought and of the amalgamation of disparate experience. They have recovered unification of sensibility; they can devour any kind of experience.

I must go back now to something that A. said. He demanded a return to 'direct and lucid speech' and the lessening of the gap between the poet and the ordinary reader, and he quoted Wordsworth on the necessity that the poet should 'express himself as other men express themselves'. These are the demands that are always made by poetic reformers. If you compare Wordsworth's demands with the principles laid down by the Imagists in 1915 you will find a good deal of agreement.

P. Who were the Imagists and what were their principles?

D. The statement appeared in an Imagist anthology which contained poems by D. H. Lawrence, H. D., and others. But Lawrence soon detached himself from the group. Pound, Hulme, and Eliot were the most important poets associated with it. The six principles asserted in 1915 were these:

(*a*) To use the language of common speech, but the *exact* word, not the nearly exact, or the merely decorative word.

(*b*) To create new rhythms as the expressions of new moods.

(*c*) To allow absolute freedom in subject. It is not good art to write badly about aeroplanes and automobiles; nor is it necessarily bad art to write well about the past.

(*d*) To present an image. Poetry should render particulars exactly, and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason we oppose the 'cosmic' poet.

(*e*) To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite.

(*f*) Concentration is of the very essence of poetry.

These principles seem to me admirable in themselves and to have been remarkably well carried out by the poets of the last twenty years. How far do we agree with the Imagists? The first principle is one that we must surely all accept. I invoke the ghost of Wordsworth in its support.

A. Yes, I agree with the Imagists so far, and so, I suppose, would Wordsworth.

D. What about the rest: new rhythms, freedom in subject, particulars instead of generalities, an image presented with exactness; hardness and clarity, concentration?

C. I accept them all, with the fullest agreement.

M. So do I.

A. I distrust the insistence on hardness and concentration.

P. From what I have heard of the new rhythms, I dislike them.

B. I disliked the examples we have had of 'absolute freedom of subject'.

D. Well, three of us accept all these principles, and we all accept the first. How far has this one been observed? How far has the poetry of the last twenty years really used the language of common speech? I maintain that it has been far more successful in this respect than that of the Georgians, the nineteenth-century, or the eighteenth-century poets. Wordsworth himself, as has often been pointed out, failed to live up to his own principles. His poetry is sometimes as magniloquent as Milton's. The eighteenth-century poets used 'poetic diction' and the language of the polite world; the nineteenth-century poets poetic diction and the language of the intellectual middle classes. They did not use the language of common speech.

M. What about Burns? And Shelley (in *Julian and Maddalo*)? And Browning? And Hardy?

D. Burns is the only one of these who can be said to have used common speech. Shelley and Browning used the language of intellectual conversation; Hardy used an extraordinary mixture of poetic diction and journalese.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries poetry was aloof from the ordinary man, the man in the street and the man in the field. The new poets are the first to follow

Wordsworth's advice and bring poetry down from its supposed height. The new poetry is concerned with the things that concern the ordinary man; it is full of the rhythms, the words and phrases of common life.

You may see a further proof of this in the success of modern plays in verse, in contrast to Victorian attempts at poetic drama. The Victorian plays had no relation to the life of the time; the ordinary theatre-goer ignored them; if they were performed at all it was to small, respectful, but unenthusiastic audiences of high-brows. Contrast with this the success of the plays by Auden and Isherwood, and the astonishing success of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. These successes were possible because the new poetry is in touch with the life of the time and uses the language of common speech.

To sum up: I maintain that the new poetry has recovered a power that had been lost for more than two centuries, the power to amalgamate disparate experience, to devour any kind of experience. It has restored to poetry its contact with the ordinary life of men. This recovered vigour makes it, in capacity if not in achievement, superior to any poetry that has been written for the last two hundred years.

M. It is a startling assertion.

P. I gather that D. thinks the new poets are Donnes or Marvells, if not Shakespeares.

A. I agree that the new poetry has certain remarkable resemblances to the poetry of the seventeenth century. I think you have proved no more than that.

D. You agree then that the new poets have got something which the seventeenth-century poets had, and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets had not. That is my main point. Where we disagree is about the value of this something. I maintain that it is of very great value.

But it must not be thought that the seventeenth-century poets were the first to possess this unification of sensibility. As Eliot says, the 'metaphysicals' did not invent it; they inherited it. The work of Shakespeare is one prodigious example of it. Now I do not say that the new poets are Shakespeares. But I say that they have climbed back to the position from which Shakespeare and Donne and their contemporaries started. For this reason they can become (and are becoming) popular in a way that has not been possible for two centuries.

M. Well, we have argued long enough. There has been much throwing about of brains, and nobody, I suppose, has been converted or convinced.

P. I have not been converted or convinced. But I may say that I am rather less bewildered than I was.

M. It is possible that we have gained a very little. P. is less bewildered than he was; and to some slight degree we may have cleared our minds of cant. But we have been critics of a kind and have enjoyed ourselves; and I reflect that this is the first justification of criticism, and perhaps the only one that is necessary: that it is a natural and enjoyable activity. Let us drink to the health of poetry and to the health of criticism.

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