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THE HAZARD OF MODERN POETRY

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POETRY

ERICH HELLER

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· *To*
SHEILA AND PETER STERN

PREFACE

These talks were first delivered on the **B.B.C.** Third Programme and were printed in *The Listener*. The editor has kindly allowed me to publish them in this form.

Thanks are due also to Messrs Faber & Faber for permission to quote from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and to the Hogarth Press for permission to quote from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, translated by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender.

Except for a few additions and the Postscript, the talks are here printed as delivered. Thus they owe their existence to the suggestion, inspiring interest and intelligent criticism of Miss Anna Kallin, of the B.B.C. Third Programme. Their present form they owe to the publishers' belief, gratefully acknowledged and reluctantly accepted, that they merit a certain degree of permanence.

The Postscript was written in the place of individual replies to many a letter from kind, puzzled and dissenting listeners and readers. In so far as I have made literal use of their queries and disagreements, I should like to acknowledge my debt to them.

E.H.

It is on an Easter Sunday that Goethe's Faust comes back to his study from one of the most lyrical walks of German literature. He is accompanied by a strange black poodle that, out in the fields, insisted on joining him. Faust opens the Gospel according to St John, determined to translate it into his 'beloved German'. He is defeated by the very first line. What is it that was in the beginning? *Logos*—the Word. No, it seems impossible to rate the word so high. 'Meaning' might be better. Yet it sounds too feeble to be placed at the source of everything that is. And Faust tries 'Force'; but having moved away so far from the original text, why should the translator not go further in his freedom? 'In the beginning was the Deed'. This satisfies Faust—and excites the poodle. The translation comes to nothing because at this point the dog grows restive. He will not listen even to Faust's most potent demon-soothing magic. For he comes from hell and is a devil.

Easter Sunday and a magician; *Logos* into Word, Word into Deed, dog into devil—the scene is set for the hazard of modern poetry.

But perhaps we ought to be more scholarly. Let us therefore turn to the *History of the Royal Society, its Institution, Design and Progress in the Advancement of Experimental Philosophy*. It was written in the second half of the seventeenth century by Thomas Sprat, Bishop of Rochester. The poet Cowley prefaced it poetically, stating the book's polemical and apologetic themes with that greater verve and vigour which, in mundane matters, the poet can more easily afford than the bishop. The poem celebrates Philosophy or Reason, referred to as

He, for—so we are told—it is a 'Male Virtue'. Even before the foundation of the Royal Society he was a promising youngster:

But, oh! the Guardians and the Tutors then,
 (Some negligent, and some ambitious Men)
 Would ne'er consent to set him free,
 Or his own natural Powers to let him see,
 Lest that should put an end to their Authoritie.
 That his own Business he might quite forget,
 They amus'd him with the sports of wanton Wit,
 With the Desserts of Poetry they fed him,
 Instead of solid Meats t'increase his Force . . .

Luckily, the importer of solid meats was close at hand:

Bacon at last, a mighty Man, arose,
 Whom a wise King and Nature chose
 Lord Chancellor of both their Laws,
 And boldly undertook the injur'd Pupil's Cause.

And how, according to this vision of an early scientific enthusiast, did the Lord Chancellor set about his bold business? Thus:

From Words, which are but Pictures of the Thought,
 (Though we our Thoughts from them perversely
 drew)
 To Things, the Mind's right Object, he it brought:
 Like foolish Birds to painted Grapes we flew;
 He sought and gather'd for our Use the true;
 And when on Heaps the chosen Bunches lay,
 He pressed them wisely the mechanic Way,
 Till all their Juice did in one Vessel join,
 Ferment into a Nourishment Divine,
 The thirsty Soul's refreshing Wine.

Maybe this is the first significantly ludicrous poem ever written. It not only reads like an anticipated parody of Faust's 'Word into Deed', but also states with naive earnestness a theme that for three centuries to come was to pursue the lives and works of poets and artists with a persistent curse, whispering into their ears now the sinister threats of unreality, and now again the subtle temptation of transcendent glory. Can we trace the flight of the foolish birds back to the nest where they were fledged; where on the wings of words, which are but pictures of the thought, they left behind the things, the mind's right object? The bird's-eye view of an immensely complex landscape of time may choose for closer inspection a scene in Marburg. There a theological dispute is in progress. The disputants are two powerful theologian-reformers of the sixteenth century: Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli. To the modern lay-mind their debate may seem like mere scholastic hair-splitting, but history would suggest that it was more like Samson's hair-cut. Its consequences most certainly unsteadied the pillars upon which a great house stood.

The dispute is about the nature of the eucharist, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The bread and the wine—are they the body and blood of Christ, or are they 'mere symbols'? Luther, with all his deviations from the traditional dogma, is the man of the Middle Ages. The word and the sign are for him not merely 'pictures of the thought', but the thing itself. Yet for Zwingli, steeped in the enlightened thought of the Italian Renaissance, this is a barbarous absurdity. The sacrament is 'merely' a symbol, that is, it symbolically represents what in itself it is not.

This is indeed a very particular occasion. It is a unique and uniquely sacred symbol that is being discussed. The

issue is clearly defined and specified. It is not even new. There are precedents for it throughout the history of Christian theology. All this should warn us against facile generalizations. Yet there remains the fact that never before had this question raised so much dust and generated so much heat. For now it is merely the theological climax of a deep revolution in the thoughts and feelings with which men respond to the world they inhabit; the Miltonian opportunity for a 'Truth who, when she gets a free and willing hand, opens herself faster than the pace of method and discourse can overtake her'. It is now that thirty years of war lie ahead, and the slow emergence of an age in which not only the sacraments but the holiness of all that is holy **will** cease to be 'literally true'. There **will** be a world which must find it more and more difficult even to grasp, let alone accept, what was in Luther's mind when he fought Zwingli's 'demythologising' (an activity as hazardous as the word that expresses it, tongue-twister for angels and bedevilling the minds of men.) Lost **will** be that unity of word and deed, of picture and thing, of the bread and the glorified body. Body **will** become merely body, and symbol merely symbol. And as for the refreshing wine, it **will** be drunk by thirsty souls only when in the very depths of their thirst they are quite sure that it was pressed from real grapes in the mechanic way.

What, then, is the nature of the revolution signalled by a theological dispute that seems concerned merely with degrees of symbolic 'literalness'? And what, above all, has it to do with our subject, which is the fortunes of modern poetry? Perhaps we can answer both questions at once by saying that Zwingli's argument did to the status of religion, poetry, and art what some time later Copernicus did to the status of the earth. As the earth was

to become merely a planet in the company of planets, so now the spirit of poetry became merely a spirit in the society of spirits. Of course, I do not confuse a theological controversy with an exercise in aesthetic theory. But I do suggest that at the end of a period that we rather vaguely call the Middle Ages there occurred a radical change in man's idea of reality, in that complex fabric of unconsciously held convictions about what is real and what is not. This was a revolution comparable to that earlier one which Nietzsche called the victory of the Socratic mind over the spirit of Dionysian tragedy. And indeed both victories saddled us with the unending bother of aesthetic philosophy. Plato was the first great man of Greece who charged poetry with the offence of confounding man's soberly useful notions about reality, an indictment that led to Aristotle's theory about the 'use' of tragedy. And ever since Zwingli the most common response to the reality of symbols has been a shrugging of shoulders, or an edified raising of eyes and brows, or an apology for poetry, or an aesthetic theory.

It would, of course, be absurd to believe that before the triumph of that reason which Cowley celebrated, men were less able than we are (and are we really so able?) to distinguish between illusion and reality, between lunacy and common sense. This would be putting the question in terms that do not apply, because these are the terms of modernity. It is even possible that on the level of an *elite* the ability to discriminate was more assured than is ours. For only when the spiritual is known and felt to be real, can there be realistic discrimination between things that claim to be things of the spirit. These men held in their hands, touching and weighing it, the reality of the infinite; we have merely its taste. And it is wiser, or so they say, not to judge in a conflict of tastes—*de gustibus*

nondisputandum. They knew the symbol when they saw it; we only see it, and are left in the dark. For it is merely a symbol, and may mean this or that or nothing on earth.

One way of speaking of the revolution I have in mind is to say that it reduced the stature of the symbol to the *merely* symbolic. Thus it deprived the language of religion as well as of art of an essential degree of reality. At the beginning the separation proved most beneficial to both partners. Reality, freed from its commitments to the symbol, became more really real than before. The hand of man, reaching out for his reality, was no longer unsteadied by the awe and fear of the symbolic mystery. He acquired the surgeon's hygienic dexterity. And reality, pressed the mechanic way, yielded ample nourishment, real if not divine. As reality became more real, so the symbol became more symbolic and art more artistic. The artist ceased to be a humble craftsman, supplying goods for the common trade between heaven and earth. He set himself up as a dealer in very special specialities, with a heaven all to himself and an earth to look down upon.

But there were also signs of uneasiness. They mounted to a climax of tension in the seventeenth century. What was first felt to be a liberation appeared more and more as a robbery. Robbed of its real significance, what did the symbol signify? Robbed of its symbolic meaning, what did reality mean? What was the State on earth? A Leviathan. What was God? More and more a *deus absconditus*, an infinitely remote and impenetrably veiled God. This was not only the century of Newton, the century of cosmic tidiness and calculable pulls and pushes. This it was indeed in the sphere of 'reality', that obedient patient under the fingers of man's mind. But in the sphere of the soul, disobedient sufferer of God's anger

and grace, it was the century of Pascal and Hobbes, of the desperate and once more triumphant convolutions of the baroque, and of the metaphysical poets. Commerce between the separated spheres, felt to be urgent again, moved uneasily, intensely, and anxiously along disrupted lines of communication. Strategical points had to be gained by cunning, break-throughs to be dared with the passion of spiritual violence. The baroque was the architectural style of such manoeuvres of the soul. And as for spiritual cunning, it was in the conceits of metaphysical poetry, in the self-conscious ambiguities of poetical language (there are, we are told, as many types of it as deadly sins), and in the paradoxes of Pascal's religious thought. For ambiguity and paradox are the manner of speaking when reality and symbol, man's mind and his soul, are at cross-purposes.

The estrangement was to continue. The symbol was made homeless in the real world, and the real world made itself a stranger to the symbol. Architecture, the most 'real' of all the arts, steadily declined. After the seventeenth century Europe no longer dwelt or worshipped or ruled in buildings created in the image of authentic spiritual vision. For all that was real was an encumbrance to the spirit who, in his turn, only occasionally called on the real, and even then with the embarrassment of an uninvited guest. He was most at home where there was least 'reality'—in music. The music of modern Europe is the one and only art in which it surpassed the achievement of former ages. This is no accident of history: it is the speechless triumph of the spirit in a world of words without deeds and deeds without words.

The great revolutions in human history do not change the face of the earth. They change the face of man, the image in which he beholds himself and the world

around him. The earth merely follows suit. It is the truly pathetic fallacy of empiricism that it offers as safe harbour what is the ocean itself, the storms, the waves and the shipwrecks, namely man's experience of himself and the 'objective' world. The history of human kind is a repository of scuttled objective truths, and a museum of irrefutable facts—refuted not by empirical discoveries, but by man's mysterious decisions to experience differently from time to time. All relevant objective truths are born and die as absurdities. They come into being as the monstrous claim of an inspired rebel and pass away with the eccentricity of a superstitious crank. Only between these extremities of the mind is 'objective truth' truly true, alive at the centre of everything. Then this truth inspires the deeds of men and helps them to form the images of faith. Thus 'objective truth' is equally at work in the totems and taboos of savages, the pyramids of Egypt, the gods and centaurs of the Olympian friezes, the cosmology of Dante and the theory of the expanding universe. And who, I wonder, could journey from Delphi to the Byzantine monastery of Hosios Lucas, leaving the Charioteer in the morning, and in the evening gazing at the mosaic Madonna in the apse of the monastery's church, without being followed into his dreams by echoes from the abyss that divides throughout the ages truth from truth, and the image of man from the image of man?

The ostrich is said to bury his head in the sand at the approach of inescapable danger. Experience is to the empiricist what the sand is to the ostrich's head. Truth, however, does not reside in that which is both blinding and shifting. Only the inescapable danger that there may be no Truth is inescapably true. Hence it is not empirical knowledge that is the organ of Truth. What is empirically

true and real now is largely what has escaped the attention of the past, and **will** escape from the future as a boring anachronism. Uncertainty alone is ineluctably real. It is through despair that man escapes from even this inescapable reality. But he meets it in faith, recognising it without losing hope and suffering it not without love.

The elusiveness of this faith and the persistent closeness of that despair make modern poetry the hazardous enterprise that it is. True, the poet is at all times more easily afflicted than others by despair and the waning of faith. But these are more than individual perils in our age, for at its very centre is an amorphous indecision. The physicists, always busy empirically to vindicate metaphysical notions about the nature of the world, seem today more directly preoccupied with the metaphysical beliefs insensibly accepted by the community. With the precision of mathematical reasoning they explore the terrible imprecision of our faith. For both our faith and our physics are fascinated by the vast voids inside and outside everything that exists, by empty fields of tension, and by the indeterminate motion of particles senselessly speeding around one another in order to hide from themselves the nothingness at the core of all things.

This, it seems, is the consummation of that revolution of which I have spoken. Before it began, the world, with its bread and its wine, was in all its sinfulness the centre of divine attention. From this obstinate supervision man struggled into a new freedom. He exercised it gloriously **within** the vast symbolic space that lies between divine presence and divine remoteness. He learned to speak his own language. But the more freely he spoke, the less the word counted. For it became the sport of wanton wit. And thought's more reliable objects were therefore things, the true outcome of the deed that was at the

beginning. At the end there may be neither words nor deeds, but merely, for all we know, a slight disease, a rash of matter that matters little to so robust a body of nothingness.

Against this background I invite you to ponder the problems of modern poetry—problems that poetry shares with all the other arts. Therefore, in speaking about poetry we always mean more than poetry, just as poetry always means more than itself. What is it, then, that poetry means? Its meaning is the vindication of the worth and value of the world, of life and of human experience. At heart all poetry is praise and celebration. Its joy is not mere pleasure, its lamentation not mere weeping, and its despair not mere despondency. Whatever it does, it cannot but confirm the existence of a meaningful world—even when it denounces its meaninglessness. Poetry means order, even with the indictment of chaos; it means hope, even with the outcry of despair. It is concerned with the true stature of things. And being concerned with the true stature of things, all great poetry is realistic.

But what is to happen if doubt about the true stature of things invades the very sphere of experience and intuitive insight in which poetry is formed? If suspicion attacks the value of the real world? Then the poetic impulse will seek refuge in a sphere all its own, a little cosmos of inwardness salvaged from the devaluation of the world. 'The Discovery and Colonisation of Inwardness'—this might be a fitting title for the story of poetry from the Renaissance to our day. It begins with the vitality of adventurers, driven from their homeland by the impoverishment of its soil, and culminates in the display of unexpected treasures. Will it end with the homesickness 'of a defeated race? Or with the father's return to the prodigal son?

II

I said that all great poetry is concerned with the true stature of things; also that it is the vindication of a valuable and meaningful world. Saying this, I implied that the true stature of things lies in their having a meaningful place in a valuable world. Clearly, this was a pronouncement of faith, or, in terms more in keeping with the prevalent manner of speaking, the begging of a question—in fact, of the very question which the mind of the age seems bent on answering in the negative. The perpetual threat of this negative answer is, I suggested, one of the embarrassments of modern poetry.

Reason, as we have come to understand and exercise it, that is, reason as it dominates most of our rational activities, must, in the course of its own progress, lead to this negative answer. In a sense it is even true to say that it *is* this negative answer. For its chosen virtue is 'objectivity'. And what is its objectivity if not the determination to let 'things' have their own way in their dealings with the mind, and not to allow the human affections to interfere with the advance or direction of discovery—in other words, to follow the argument wherever it **will** take us? This virtue of rational objectivity is indeed both a trusting and a heroic virtue, and only self-seeking rogues or eccentric simpletons **will** wish to dispense with it lightheartedly. On the other hand, only simpletons with no self to seek and no centre to leave can for ever remain unaware of the problem raised by the very trust and heroism of objectivity. What is its trust? The conviction that the argument **will** lead to something that is not only of use, but of true value. What is its heroism? The readiness not to

flinch if it does not. And what is its fallacy? The assumption that the values, banned from the method of enquiry, **will** yet make their way into the answers; that means, indifferent to values, can yield an end justified not merely by its 'correctness' or its usefulness, but by its intrinsic value. For things lose their value for man if he is set on withholding it from them.

The human affections are the only instruments of recognizing and responding to values. By treating the affections as the rascals in the school of reason, and as the peace-breakers in the truth-bound community, Reason—the rationalist's reason—has set up a kind of truth which leaves the human affections as idle as do, by general consent, the 'objective' methods that lead to its discovery. The workshops in which our truths are manufactured are surrounded by swarms of unemployed affections. Unemployment leads to riots, and riots there were and are. The most powerful among them in the recent history of thought was romanticism. The war between rationalism and romanticism has left modern poetry with its hazardous legacy.

Nietzsche, who lived and thought at the very centre of the turmoil, knew that in this situation the most urgent business of philosophy was the problem of values—a business uneasily shirked by philosophy to this very day. To him this problem was more fundamental than all the problems of knowledge. These, he said, are serious only if the question of values is answered; and without this answer the pursuit of knowledge may cease to be serious, becoming desperate instead, 'a handsome tool for man's self-destruction', as he called it.

If it is not in the rationalistic pursuits of objective knowledge but only through the exercise of human affections that the question of values can be answered,

can it then be answered at all? Is knowledge, gained in this way, not necessarily as elusive and as fickle, as deceptive and as unreliable, as are the human affections themselves? And if poetry is what we believe it to be, namely the affections' appeal to the affections, what sort of truth or value can there be in poetry? There is, it seems, an odd disparity between the seriousness with which poets view their profession, and the use to which it is put. They toil in the exacting service of the spirit in order to please the spirit's more frivolous moods. This has been the quixotic predicament of poetry—and not only of poetry—throughout the modern age. It came to a climax when rationalism and romanticism between them contrived to destroy the last remnants of a rational order of values.

The recovery of a rational order of values was, in this period, a task to which some of the greatest thinkers and poets dedicated themselves. Among thinkers the truest and most passionate was Pascal. The inventor of the calculating machine—of an embryonic mechanical brain—also knew that the heart had reasons of which reason knew nothing. And Pascal meant *reasons* of the heart, not that unreason of the emotions with which the romantic mind so often vented its exasperation at the rationality of mechanical brains. The *esprit de finesse* which he, the mathematician, opposed to the *esprit de géométric* had nothing to do with the emotional whims of the irrational. Mind it was, if ever there was mind—mind, intelligence, reason, an instrument of rational knowledge, of rationally knowing *logos*, sense and value. Pascal's *coeur* is the organ of recognizing what is at the heart of things. His reasoning of the heart is the method of discourse when the subject of the discourse is not the logic of propositions but the logic of values. Here is

the source of that strange fascination that this most passionately Christian thinker of the seventeenth century had for the most passionately anti-Christian mind of the nineteenth—Nietzsche.

Both these men's minds were focused on the problem of values, and it is not by accident but by reason of history that for Nietzsche this preoccupation so often took the form of a seemingly aesthetic problem—the problem of the relationship between poetry and truth. This was, he said at the end of his conscious life, the first serious concern of his youth and the 'holy terror' of his later years. And to him it was identical with the question of the truth or untruth of values. For in the period between Pascal and Nietzsche it was above all in poets and artists that this essentially religious problem retained its vexing vigour. And if it inspired their most sublime thoughts, it also was a constant strain on their poetic resources.

To support this by examples would amount to making a dictionary of celebrated names—Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats; in France almost every poet between Baudelaire and Valéry; in Germany above all Goethe, Hölderlin, and Rilke—not to mention the theoretical writings of Schiller and the Romantics. And if we search for the most precise words in order to define the hazards of modern poetry, I doubt whether we need go on after finding Hölderlin's great poem *Bread and Wine*:

. . . und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?

... in such spiritless times, why to be poet at all?

What was this *dürftige Zeit*, this time poor in spirit but further than any from the Kingdom of Heaven, that made Hölderlin question the justification of being a poet; this meagre but forceful time that pushed poetry to the very

edge of silence, of that 'abyss' that Baudelaire too sensed at the feet of poetry; this hostile time that yet inspired in Hölderlin, and in Baudelaire, and in Rimbaud, poetry truly unheard of before? For in their poetry speechlessness itself seemed to burst into speech without breaking the silence. It was poetry separated from madness by the mere margin of the miracle that reveals in one moment the lucid depths of mystery at the price of darkness for what afterwards remains of life. What indeed was the *dürftige Zeit*?

It was a time in which bread and wine were mere commodities; a time in which reality meant nothing and meaning was unreal; and if its sense of reality was to be the measure of that 'real' which the poet, following Aristotle's precept, was to 'imitate', then poetry had to cease to be poetry. It was a time of which Hegel, Hölderlin's contemporary, said that 'a r t . . . is and **will** remain a thing of the past' because 'the mode of prose has absorbed all the concepts of the mind and impressed them with its prosaic stamp'. And in his awkward philosophical language he yet described exactly the hazards that lay ahead for poetry. 'Poetry', he said, '**will** have to take on the business of so thorough a recasting and remodelling of reality that, faced with the unyielding mass of the prosaic, it **will** find itself involved everywhere in manifold difficulties'.

Hegel was proved wrong—by poetry, not by reality. But at what a cost! One is almost tempted to say: at the cost of Hölderlin's sanity and the survival of Rimbaud's genius. And certainly at the cost of poetry's simplicity, of that profound simplicity which is the most precious fruit of peace prevailing between the poet's thought and the thought of his age. This peace is in the Homeric battles, in Aeschylus' tragedies, and even in Dante's

descent into hell. But it is nowhere in Holderlin's poetry, not even in its sublime moments of utter tranquillity. For these come to pass when the exile finds a home with exiles, when the rootless poet is received into the company of rootless gods:

Aber wo sind sie? ... über dem Haupt droben in anderer Welt.

Where, though, where are they? ... far above ourselves, away in a different world.

The belief that the poet seeks inspiration in being beside himself is, even in its most 'classical' forms, a romantic fallacy. This fallacy has, ever since Schopenhauer, informed many of our most widely accepted aesthetic theories: for instance, the theory of the 'impersonal' character of poetry, of the poet as a neutral agent bringing about the fusion and crystallisation of nameless experience. These theories merely express, and express significantly, the spiritual depreciation of the real lives that real selves lead in the real world. It is neither in 'depersonalisation' nor in intoxication that the great poet finds his poetic self, but in that sobriety of vision which sees what really is. Holderlin called it *heilige Nüchternheit*, 'holy sobriety', and Valéry once said, paradoxically: 'If I were to write, I would infinitely rather write something weak, in full consciousness and in complete lucidity, than give birth to a masterpiece in a state of trance'.

'Where sobriety leaves you', wrote Hölderlin, 'there is also the limit of your inspiration. The great poet is never beside himself. To ponder this sentence, and then go to Hölderlin's greatest poetry, and then remember his fate—these are three acts of realising a tragedy. It is not only Hölderlin's tragedy, but the tragedy of a world that has set up its own sober reality on the far side of the

poet's sobriety, ana has pushed the poet to a place where he, who is never beside himself, is beside the world. And when Hölderlin defines poetic sobriety as the intellectual power to discover for every particular thing its rightful place within the whole, adding that there can be no excellence in either art or life 'without reason or thoroughly organised feelings', then the most lucidly true vision of poetry and life throws into relief the falsity of a thoroughly disorganised reality in which life has no poetry and poetry no life. And in such a homeless world the poet's home-coming is an adventure beset by incomprehensible dangers. For where there is neither holiness nor spirit, there the holy sobriety of the spirit is like addiction to intoxicants. And when reason insists on the sole validity of its reasons, then the heart, Pascal's heart, is broken by the very force of its own rationality.

It is then that what really is appears like the vision of a visionary, and the realism of great poetry becomes 'metaphysical'; not, however, by wilfully deserting the physical world, but by being left outside through a peculiar contraction of the circumference of the real.

Yet we must not lose sight of a fact that we have so far deliberately neglected in order to bring out more clearly a distinctive quality of modern poetry. Poetry, at all times, is not merely descriptive and imitative in the Aristotelian sense. It is always also creative; creative indeed in the sense of making things that were not there before—and the derivation of the word 'poetry' points to just this kind of 'making'. But it is creative also in a profounder and more elusive sense. Poetry heightens and cultivates the creative element that is in experience itself. For experience is not in the impressions we receive; it is in *making* sense. And poetry is the foremost sense-maker of experience. It renders *actual* ever new sectors of the

apparently inexhaustible field of *potential* experience. This is why the poet is, as I said in my first talk, an easier prey to doubt and despair than people content to live with the sense made by others.

Every civilized society lives and thrives on a silent but profound agreement as to what is to be accepted as the valid mould of experience. Civilization is a complex system of dams, dykes, and canals warding off, directing, and articulating the influx of the surrounding fluid element; a fertile fenland, elaborately drained and protected from the high tides of chaotic, unexercised, and inarticulate experience. In such a culture, stable and sure of itself within the frontiers of 'naturalised' experience, the arts wield their creative power not so much in width as in depth. They do not create new experience, but deepen and purify the old. Their works do not differ from one another like a new horizon from a new horizon, but like a madonna from a madonna.

The periods of art which are most vigorous in creative passion seem to occur when the established pattern of experience loosens its rigidity without as yet losing its force. Such a period was the Renaissance, and Shakespeare its poetic consummation. Then it was as though the discipline of the old order gave depth to the excitement of the breaking away, the depth of joy and tragedy, of incomparable conquests and irredeemable losses. Adventurers of experience set out as though in life-boats to rescue and bring back to the shore treasures of knowing and feeling which the old order had left floating on the high seas. The works of the early Renaissance and the poetry of Shakespeare vibrate with the compassion for live experience in danger of dying from exposure and neglect. In this compassion was the creative genius of the age. Yet it was a genius of courage, not of

desperate audacity. For, however elusively, it still knew of harbours and anchors, of homes to which to return, and of barns in which to store the harvest. The exploring spirit of art was in the depths of its consciousness still aware of a scheme of things into which to fit its exploits and creations.

But the more this scheme of things loses its stability, the more boundless and uncharted appears the ocean of potential exploration. In the blank confusion of infinite potentialities flotsam of significance gets attached to jetsam of experience; for everything is sea, everything is at sea—

... the sea is all about us;
The sea is the land's edge also, the granite
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
Its hints of earlier and other creation . . .

—and Rilke tells a story in which, as in Mr T. S. Eliot's poem, it is again the sea and the distance of 'other creation' that becomes the image of the poet's reality. A rowing boat sets out on a difficult passage. The oarsmen labour in exact rhythm. There is no sign yet of the destination. Suddenly a man, seemingly idle, breaks out into song. And if the labour of the oarsmen meaninglessly defeats the real resistance of the real waves, it is the idle singer who magically conquers the despair of apparent aimlessness. While the people next to him try to come to grips with the element that is next to them, his voice seems to bind the boat to the farthest distance so that the farthest distance draws it towards itself. 'I don't know why and how', is Rilke's conclusion, 'but suddenly I understood the situation of the poet, his place and function in this age. It does not matter if one denies him every place—except this one. There one must tolerate him'.

It is the farthest distance to which the poet is bound. What is next to him does not matter. Yet at any moment anything that is next to him may be illumined by sparks struck from the invisible wire that binds his boat to its mysteriously distant destination. The humblest object or the tiniest shred of experience may unexpectedly become a conductor of infinity, charged with a force that was once distributed over a whole comprehensive order holding in their right places the great and little things. This order is no more. Who knows our place, or the place of anything? Where are the links that join the creation with the creator, and creature with creature? This is the theme of Rilke's first *Duino Elegy*. Everything is separate; dissociation is the order of the world:

. . . *Ach, wen vermögen
wir denn zu brauchen? Engel nicht, Menschen nicht,
und die findigen Tiere merken es schon,
dass wir nicht sehr verlässlich zu Haus sind
in dergedeuteten Welt. . .*

. . . Alas, who is there
we can make use of? Not angels, not men;
and already the knowing brutes are aware
that we don't feel very securely at home
within our interpreted world . . .

Yet here or there, out of place and out of order, a strangely arbitrary object seems to mean everything to us:

. . . *Es bleibt uns vielleicht
irgend ein Baum an dem Abhang, dass wir ihn täglich
wiedersähen; es bleibt uns die Strasse von gestern
und das verzogene Treusein einer Gewohnheit,
der es bei uns gefiel, und so blieb sie und ging nicht.*

. . . There remains, perhaps,
some tree on a slope, to be looked at day after day;
there remains for us yesterday's road and the cup-
board-love loyalty
of a habit that liked us and stayed and never gave
notice.

The portraitist of this situation is Van Gogh. He painted the tree of Rilke's elegy, the sunflower, the chair and the boots that are the chance receptacles of all the homeless energy of the spirit which had once its lawful house with Giotto's angels and madonnas—once a king of kingdoms, now a squatter in boots. Look at this bough of almond blossom, look at this chair—indeed, they get much more than their due of the spirit, almost bursting with its superfluity. It is a mere moment of explosion that separates Van Gogh's objects from the distorted fragments of surrealism.

The notorious obscurity of modern poetry is due to the absence from our lives of commonly accepted symbols to represent and house our deepest feelings. And so these invade the empty shells of fragmentary memories, hermit-crabs in a sea of uncertain meaning. We may yet reach the moon. Interplanetary traffic **will** soon prove easier than communication between countless private universes. For the following lines of Mr T. S. Eliot are not only true of words before the ultimate mystery; they also apply to words caught in the penultimate muddle:

. . . Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision . . .



Goethe, in his autobiography, complains angrily about the contempt with which occasional poetry has come to be regarded. Occasional poetry, poetry prompted by real occasions, is, he says, 'the first and most genuine of all types of poetry'. And in a conversation with Eckermann he made it quite clear that he did not mean merely rhymed toasts. 'All my poems', he said, 'are occasional poems; they are inspired by reality and founded on it. I think nothing of poetry that has no roots in the real'. Of course, this was aimed at the Romantics, a warning sounded into what he called the 'epoch of forced talents'.

What were these forced talents? To Goethe they were hot-house plants out of season, poets who left 'life' out in the cold and flowered in the heat of a purely reflective imagination. Goethe's irritation with them was so intense because he himself already knew the temptation. His Tasso is conceived half-way between the real Tasso and Baudelaire, and his Werther, had he survived a century or so, might have become Rimbaud. And if Goethe had completed the fragmentary masterpiece, *Pandora*, his Epimetheus might indeed have left the real wholly to Prometheus, choosing himself to rise, with Pandora in his arms, to a sphere where Mallarmé's *rêve dans sa nudité idéale* is realised. Did Goethe not, on two solemn poetic occasions, define the poet's distinctive gift from the gods as the power to say what he suffered—suffered at the hands of the real world? Indeed, Goethe's realism was already on the defensive. The peace in which he lived with the real world—his proudest possession, the most precious show-piece of the collector—was maintained only by endless diplomatic manoeuvres and compromises with the innate tendencies of his genius.

Occasional poetry, indeed! But the occasion was not always the real. More often it was the war between reality and poetry. How would Goethe have reacted to Nietzsche's belief that world and existence are justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon?—a declaration that contains the complete programme of that kind of poetry which, one-sidedly and ignoring many a poet of great merit, we have chosen to see as distinctively modern. No doubt, Goethe would have reacted with horror, but with a horror the greater for its intimate knowledge of the horrifying. For although Nietzsche had not yet arrived, Goethe knew and undecidedly opposed the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. And between Kant and Nietzsche there is a connection which does not lack in historical logic, and certainly not in that logic by which so much of modern poetry has come into being.

To cut a long and complicated story short: Kant brought to a dramatic halt the triumphal procession of rationalism. If Descartes was sure that rational thought was the firm anchor of existence—*cogito ergo sum*—then Kant was equally sure that thinking merely sailed through existence like a ship on the surface of the sea, exploring much, but always hemmed in by its own horizon. However far-away a distance the voyager may reach, there **will** always be horizon, the horizon of space and time, and for ever out of sight the ultimate ground and harbour—the Absolute. Therefore it was not in pure reason, in the rationalist's reason, that man could hope to find that final certainty the continual quest for which seems to be the flaw and crux and glory of his nature. Indeed, Kant did not deny the legitimacy of its claims; they had to be satisfied—not, however, through man's rational consciousness, but through his moral conscience. The moral law was the tool of the Absolute.

This came as a shock to poets who had begun to believe that, more than priests, they were in touch with the Absolute. Kleist was in despair. Schiller's aesthetic philosophy was an endless bargaining with Kant: give me a share, and be it a modest one, in the great Inaccessible; I shall pay in good moral currency for the sublime aesthetic pass. The Romantics, of course, went further. Taking Kant's constitutional monarchy of Reason for its abdication, they rushed Feeling to the empty throne. Nor was the disturbance confined to Germany. The Germans, **willing** executioners to the court of history, merely carried out a vague but commanding European order. Coleridge, too, received and accepted it. It reached Baudelaire by way of Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner. And even Goethe, who rarely allowed himself to be worried by philosophical upheavals, once frowningly resigned himself to Kant's dictate of 'absolute' ignorance without, however, trusting in the reliability of the Kantian moral guidance. 'Therefore', he noted at the end of a reflection about Kant's philosophy, 'we shall escape into poetry where we may hope to find some satisfaction'.

Goethe's urbane resignation was soon to turn into a manifesto of 'absolute' poetry. Prefigured in Schelling and Schopenhauer, the promotion of the aesthetic faculty to the minister of the Absolute was accomplished in Nietzsche's early philosophy. The world is at heart an aesthetic phenomenon. No knowledge and no moral law can comprehend its meaning. It is music that sounds its very depths, and poetry that circles around the central mystery—poetry illuminated, like the moon, by a distant sun, and **illuminating**, like the moon, the obscurity of the night. 'Only as an aesthetic phenomenon are world and existence for ever justified'. Nietzsche called this the artist's gospel—and again and again he returned to the

belief that it was the only gospel of truth to be had on earth. Whenever he doubted its validity, he was left with Nothing, with that nihilism of which he was the grand, desperate, and despairingly hopeful explorer. For he was a late-comer in the succession that leads from Kant to Schopenhauer, and from Schopenhauer to Richard Wagner and Baudelaire. Nietzsche, in his time, went even further than Mallarmé. '*Après avoir trouvé le Néant, j'ai trouvé le Beau*', said Mallarmé. Nietzsche discovered an ever profounder Nothing each time he suspected that the Beautiful was mere illusion.

One year before his death Goethe published a message to young poets. He asked them to remember that poetry may well accompany life, but does not know how to guide it. However ambitious the artist may be, he added, in the end he will find that he has expressed merely his own individuality; for 'what is in a poem is essentially the same as that which is in one's own life'. It seems that poetry travelled an immeasurable distance in the forty years between Goethe's message and Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. A pleasant companion became a tyrannical master. What Goethe took to be the expression of the poet's personality was suddenly felt to be a suicidal weapon, killing the person in order to set free the absolute soul. This was not only the epoch of forced talents, as Goethe feared; it was the epoch of poetical martyrdom. Its heroes were selfless commissioners of the Absolute, fasting their lives out to produce the heavenly food, drugging and deranging their senses to catch a glimpse of the invisible. 'I am incompetent at everything except the Absolute', said Mallarmé, and Baudelaire felt he had buried, 'all my heart, all my tenderness, all my religion, all my hatred' under die Flowers of Evil. For it is through poetry, he said, that 'the soul sees glories beyond the grave'.

In the beginning it was Kant, putting in order the world of reason and senses by shutting out the great Unknown; in the end was Rimbaud, letting in the great Unknown by 'slowly and deliberately confusing all his senses, drugging himself with every conceivable poison' and reaching the Holy of Holies as 'the great invalid and criminal', 'supreme scholar' of the Mystery and 'damned citizen' of the real world. For it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that the world is justified.

To the devaluation of everything that is in the world—and, therefore, as Goethe still believed, also in poetry and art—that is, to the cheapening of all content corresponds the artist's heightened consciousness of the value and significance of pure form. And if all the meanings that are in words have become as worn and shabby as the cheap wares of traders in second-hand utilities, then the poet will trust pure sound to yield the vibrating intimations of the Absolute. Of course, art is at all times concerned with form, and poetry at all times not indifferent to sound. What matters here is the degree of emphasis and awareness, the distribution of significance and the scope of cultivation. Who, I wonder, could have said, before a Romantic poet, Novalis, said it, that there ought to be poems of mere beautiful sounds and beautiful words, disconnected and without sense? And who before Baudelaire could even have felt what Nietzsche saw and knew—that the artist experiences that which all non-artists call form as the content and the thing itself? For what Nietzsche had in mind was not what Goethe meant by form—*geprägte Form, die lebend sich entwickelt*—but an extreme which he himself denounced as perverse; an obsession with form as content, turning all real contents into 'mere formalities', including, as he added, our own lives. He meant, in fact, *le goût immodéré de la forme*, of

which Baudelaire knew only too well that it led to 'disorders, monstrous and unheard-of.

If Goethe still believed that 'life' was the inspiration of his 'occasional poetry', then in the nineteenth century a kind of poetry emerged that found its occasion in life's loss of inspiration. Valéry called it 'absolute' poetry. It was the confounding climax of the history of self-conscious artistic creativeness as it began at the time of the Renaissance. Hand in hand with it went a steady devaluation of the created world. At that climax nothing real seemed of value any more. Value was the contraband of unreality smuggled into the real world by cunning poets. Poetic creativeness became the *illicit* traffic in smuggled goods. The inflation of the real was both cause and effect of desperate investments in unreal property. Real contents were worthless; pure form was what mattered. The meaning of words meant nothing; their sound was the thing. Everything that was not created by the artist himself was felt to be dead and deadening matter; its mere touch threatened to paralyse the hand of the creator. Mallarmé cried out for 'immaculate words', esoteric hieroglyphs unsoiled by common meaning, and envied music—music again!—its ethereal medium. It was as though a creative furore without parallel in the history of the arts had been let loose in order to undo the done-for world and start afresh from chaos, this time working on a pattern more promising than that of the seven days which had led to so dismal a failure. Fishes swam through the air, the water teemed with birds, and from a rib of Eve's, Adam created God. For 'true anarchy', Novalis had predicted, 'is the creative element of true religion. It rises from total destruction as the creator of a new world'.

Its rising, however, met with considerable difficulties.

The Symbolist and Surrealist impulse soon spent itself. Baudelaire already knew that this frenzied passion of art was a canker. No lasting universe of beauty was built from the fragments of creation. In the end they remained fragments shored against the poet's ruins. He was back in the waste land. The real world went to war. A seventeenth-century vision seemed to come true once more: 'No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'. Poetry lost confidence in its power magically to illuminate its self-created magical world. It woke up to a new concern for reality. I do not mean the vigorous yet short-lived political intermezzo of poetry between the two wars, but its slow, gradual realization of traditional poetic virtues. On devious routes and with varying success some poets returned to a new realism. Although there are even signs of a new simplicity, it is not this that I have in mind; and perhaps simplicity is not yet to be had without poets forcing the pace and losing depth. For in the deeper regions of consciousness Mr T. S. Eliot's diagnosis is still, I think, true:

Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in
which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each
venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion . . .

This is more than a description of the traditional predicament of poetry: it is also more than a statement of

one particular poet's difficulties. It is said about poetry 'under conditions that seem unpropitious', about poetry in our world. Poetry is not always a raid on the inarticulate with shabby equipment. There are times when the raid is less violent, the inarticulate less obstinate, and equipment less shabby. It is at such times that poetry can be both simple and profound. It is then that the poet gets the better of words for the thing he has to say, because things then are not the nameless products of 'imageless deeds' (as Rilke called them) and words therefore not without object. Nor has the poet then to hunt up from the furthest recesses of soul and mind the thing that is worth saying, for the thing worth saying never ventures so far afield from the city of man.

It is not simplicity that I mean when I speak of a new poetic realism. What I do mean is the poet's concern for the place and stature of man in the real world. Compared with the Symbolists' chase after cosmic substances of insubstantial beauty, compared also with the pure enchantments of Valery's intellectual imagination, Hofmannsthal, even Stefan George with all his insufferable poses and second-nature affectations, and even the later Rilke are, in this sense, realistic. Rilke's case is certainly the most puzzling of all. True, his 'realism' is forced and always uncertain of itself. Never before have words like 'perhaps' or 'maybe' played so large a part in poetic language. But his *Duino Elegies* do set out to search for man, not for the life-devouring beauty. Beauty is no longer the ultimate and absolute end. On the contrary,

. . . *Denn das Schöne ist nichts
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,
und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht,
uns zu zerstören . . .*

. . . Beauty is nothing
 but the beginning of Terror we're still just able to
 bear,
 and why we adore it so is because it serenely
 disdains to destroy us

The Terror which begins with Beauty is in the wholeness and integrity of being; and it terrifies us because we have betrayed it. In betraying it we have corrupted not only ourselves, but all things around us. They fall apart and away, and their place is taken by *ein Tun ohne Bild*, deeds without words or images. It is the end of meaning and sense and thus the end of poetry. That poetry can only be recovered with the recovery of meaning and sense is, paradoxically, the starting-point of the poetry of Rilke's final phase. Its conclusion is in the paradox of its beginning. The poet, confirmed by his own achievement in his power of song and praise, offers himself, his song and praise, as evidence for meaning and sense. Yet as he was a poet at the outset, this proof proves nothing; and Rilke's search for man's reality ends, once again, with the discovery of a reality that is the poet's own creation.

The poetry does not matter'. These words from Mr T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* acquire an all but revolutionary significance if we understand them not only in their particular context but also in the context of a period of poetry in which nothing mattered except poetry. Against this background the *Four Quartets* themselves appear, in all their complexity, as the poetry of simple civic virtue—the poetry of a poet trying to read the writing of the law that has become all but illegible. This, you may say, has nothing to do with poetry. On the contrary, it is one of the few truly

hopeful signs that this civic virtue could once more be realised poetically. For in speaking of the hazard of modern poetry I did not wish to suggest that the end had come for singers and skylarks. There **will** always be skylarks; perhaps even a few nightingales. But poetry is not only the human equivalent of the song of singing birds. It is also Virgil, Dante, and Hölderlin. It is also, in its own terms, the definition of the state of man.

POSTSCRIPT

Listener

You are a reactionary and an obscurantist. You deplore 'the absence from our lives of commonly accepted symbols to represent and house our deepest feelings'. I suspect this to be a plea for religious *cliches*. Have you no faith in literary exploration, in poetic diversity and creativity, indeed in man?

Speaker

'Faith' strikes me as a misnomer. Faith is an attitude of the soul towards the unknown. No faith is required where there is knowledge. The results of centuries of literary exploration and poetic creativity are known to us. They mean as much to me as they mean to you. I cannot imagine myself without them. They have formed my idea of poetry—and are therefore responsible for everything I have said in these talks. Do you really think I have advocated religious *clichés*? I am unaware of having advocated anything. My sole concern is to understand our situation.

Listener

Your situation.

Speaker

Our situation; yours too. If I had offered you, as you suspect, a dogmatic 'solution', you would be right; but your suspicion is wrong. 'Uncertainty alone is ineluctably real'—does this sound like the offer of a dogma? Although I do not know what you mean by calling me a reactionary, the 'obscurantist' strikes home. I believe we are in the dark. Or does your faith in literary exploration,

in poetic diversity and creativity, indeed in man, provide you with a light that I cannot see?

Listener

These big words! Not much light is needed to discern in your reactionary darkness the unique literary achievement of the European novel. It makes nonsense of your contention that after the seventeenth century only music flourished in Europe.

Speaker

My words are apparently not big enough to be noticed by you. I did not say that only music flourished among the arts of modern Europe. I said it was her *distinctive* artistic achievement. It has yet to be seen whether the novel will live as long as Homer, Virgil and Dante have done. Still, there is no doubt that Stendhal, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Henry James have made distinctive contributions to the genre literature', and contributions of a kind that I could have quoted in support of what I said. In their own way they raise all my questions—above all, by the fact that their works are written in prose. But be this as it may, I had no intention of belittling any literary achievement of modern Europe, but merely believe the achievement of music to be more distinctive in kind. Besides, compared with the assured artistic form of music the formal aspects of the novel are tentative and experimental.

Listener

For us, there is only the trying.

Speaker

True. And I shall not stop you. Is this what you mean by 'faith in man'?

Listener

Yes.

Speaker

To me it seems more like the faith in what is to be tried. And the faith in poetic creativity has been tried—and by no one, I believe, with as much intensity and poetic success as by Rilke:

*Wir stehn und stemmen uns an unsre Grenzen
und reissen ein Unkenntliches herein.*

When, I ask you, have poets ever felt they were doing this? Standing on their own frontiers, pressing against them, and tearing the unknowable into the confines of poetry? And within the setting of modern poetry **Rilke** is by no means an eccentric. Where prose is the mode of knowledge, there only the unknowable has a chance of being poetic. Do you know Rilke's poem *Taube, die draussen blieb*? He wrote it a few months before his death:

*Taube, die draussen blieb, ausser dem Taubenschlag,
wieder in Kreis und Haus, einig der Nacht, dent Tag,
weiss sie die Heimlichkeit, wenn sich der Einbezug
fremdster Schrecken schmiegt in den gefühlten Flug.*

*Unter den Tauben, die allergeschonteste,
niemals gefährdetste, kennt nicht die Zärtlichkeit;
wiedererholtes Herz ist das bewohnteste:
freier durch Widerruf freut sich die Fähigkeit.*

*Über dem Nirgendssein spannt sich das Überall!
Ach der geworfene, ach der gewagte Ball,
füllt er die Hände nicht anders mit Wiederkehr:
rein um sein Heimgewicht ist er mehr.*

The poem was written for 'the feast of praise', and the praise is for the precise tenets of your faith—exploration

and poetic creativity. Its first stanza speaks of a dove that stayed outside the dovecot, an adventurous and 'creative' dove; but now the dove is back in the dovecot, united with the rest of its fellows in the routine of day and night, and only now, after all its exploits, has it come to know what it means to be at home, for only now is the movement of its wings truly felt and realized, enriched as it is by the assimilation of strangest terrors. Among doves, the second stanza continues, the most protected creature, never exposed to terrible dangers, knows not what gentleness is—as it is the recovered heart that is richest in feeling, and as power rejoices at its greater freedom won through renunciation. Above Being Nowhere, says the third stanza, extends the Everywhere (and the German word *Überall*—everywhere—also carries the associations of 'above everything'). The ball, jeopardized in the most daring throw,—does it not fill your hands with a new sensation of return? Has it not increased by the pure weight of its home-coming? The time may have come.

Listener

The time for what?

Speaker

The time for the dovecot, for the home-coming, for the realization that we have assimilated as many terrors as we can without being destroyed. There is a point beyond which there is no recovery for the exposed heart. Too many terrors dull the mind, too many riches impoverish the imagination. Can poetry for much longer continue to be everywhere and above everything? On the far side of poetry's everywhere may be yet another nowhere. For the range that 'everywhere' offers to literary exploration is surprisingly limited. Its offer of illimitable

freedom is deceptive. It is soon exhausted. Perhaps the fair has come to an end. The big showman has packed all the targets into boxes. The last ball dared hits an empty wall of canvas, canvas gives, and the ball is not returned.

Listener

How do you know?

Speaker

I was there.

Listener

Where?

Speaker

Where the big showman packed the targets into boxes. Where the canvas gave. Where the ball was not returned. Where children wept. Where, having spent their last exploratory sixpence, they cast creativity to the winds and followed another showman who promised them targets and hits.

Listener

I thought we were talking about poetry.

Speaker

So we were. And I am still talking about poetry and literary exploration.

Listener

To me it sounds like politics.

Speaker

And like morality, and like religion.

Listener

Certainly not like aesthetics. Yet are we not, in talking about poetry, concerned only with aesthetics?

Speaker

In talking about poetry we are concerned with aesthetics, and with politics, and with morality, and with

religion. I envy you your tidy mind. Yet I suspect that this sort of tidiness can be achieved only in trivial matters. Truth is likely to be untidy, the *enfant terrible* in the systematic household. For the last three centuries the intellectual life of Europe has been dominated by a passion for rational tidiness, critical analysis and constructed systems. The results seem often little more than the logical guise of a constant hankering after trivialities. That which is systematic in a system is merely the trivial aspect of true order.

Listener

You have an irritating predilection for 'merely' and 'only'. Paradoxes too have their trivial aspects.

Speaker

No doubt—particularly when they confound the system for the sake of confusion. They are perhaps less trivial when they explode systematic trivialities for the love of true order.

Listener

And 'true order' can only be grasped 'symbolically'?

Speaker

By no means. True order can only be grasped symbolically.

Listener

I am sorry, but the inverted commas were due to your own obscurity. What is this true order?

Speaker

An order that is true to experience.

Listener

Empiricism? But as you do not mean empiricism, this means nothing to me. Everything is 'experience'—for instance, the experience that there is no true order.

Speaker

And the experience that even this experience has to be fitted into an order. Without *this* experience there would be no art and no poetry; in fact, nothing for us to explore or to talk about. **W**ill you admit that the desire for meaningful order has been so persistent throughout recorded history that it is tempting to regard it as the characteristic stamp of man's nature? It certainly tempted Schopenhauer to call man *animal metaphysicum*. **W**ill you allow me also to accept it as self-evidently true?

Listener

Not without the proviso that it may be nothing more than a persistent symptom of the partial maladjustment of the race. It may be the price paid for physical survival secured against heavy odds by the sheer exercise of intelligence. In realizing her whims Nature is profuse and wasteful. She may have endowed us with more intelligence than was necessary for the struggle of life. Perhaps it is by virtue of this unemployed surplus of intelligence that we ask superfluous questions.

Speaker

Who is paradoxical now? It is by virtue of sheer intelligence that we ask foolish questions. But I grant you your proviso. What follows?

Listener

What I said: that our desire for meaningful order may be meaningless, like letters written to a non-existent address. It is madness to wait for an answer.

Speaker

So Nietzsche may have been right. The *animal metaphysicum* is the diseased animal. It must die out. Let us create the Superman. Precisely that is the meaning of Zarathustra's message.

Listener

Nietzsche became hysterical because he believed God was dead. Funerals often promote hysteria, but there exist more proper ways of mourning.

Speaker

Indeed, and not to mourn at all may be the safest way of avoiding impropriety. Another way would be not to accept the notice of death. This leaves us with three possibilities. One is the belief that we are deluded in asking for meaningful order; the other is the faith that our demand corresponds to a real order of things; the third, I am afraid, is useless for the purpose of our discussion. I mean indifference, and I doubt whether one can be indifferent to this question and yet care for poetry. In fact, I doubt, even without this qualification, whether one can consistently and seriously maintain an attitude of indifference. I suspect it would be mere pose.

Listener

Granted that Nietzsche was most consistent, madly consistent, in exploring one of your two possibilities. What are the implications of the other?

Speaker

That I am right. That the great experiment of separating meaning from reality, and symbol from fact, has ended in failure. That our passion for 'reality' has rendered absurd our desire for meaning. That our insistence on 'fact' has given the lie to truth. That our love of 'truth' has begotten an unlovable world. We have become prisoners of our intellectual freedom, an amorphous mass of victims to our sense of rational order. We are the chaos inhabiting the tidiest of all worlds. We calculate splendidly, but our calculations show that we have not enough to live by; we predict infallibly—even

unpredictability is merely a factor within high statistical probability—but what we predict is not worth living for. More often than not it is an eclipse of the sun. What I mean by true order? An order that embodies the incalculable and unpredictable, transcending our rational grasp precisely where it meets the reasons of the heart. The symbol is the body of that which transcends, the measure of the immeasurable and the visible logic of the heart's reasoning. And perhaps the reasoning heart is more single-minded than your faith in permanent exploration, and creativity assumes. Perhaps symbols are in truth less promiscuous than some poetic practitioners suggest.

Listener

Stop. Poetry is not dead.

Speaker

Nor is true order. But all signs, and above all the signs of poetry, point towards a grave disturbance.

Listener

We cannot go back to your single-minded symbolic order of the Middle Ages.

Speaker

Clearly not. But from this it does not follow that we must rush forward. The order is neither behind us nor before us. It is, or it is not. The sensible movement is in another dimension.

Listener

I wonder.

Speaker

So do I. Maybe we differ only in degrees of wonder.
